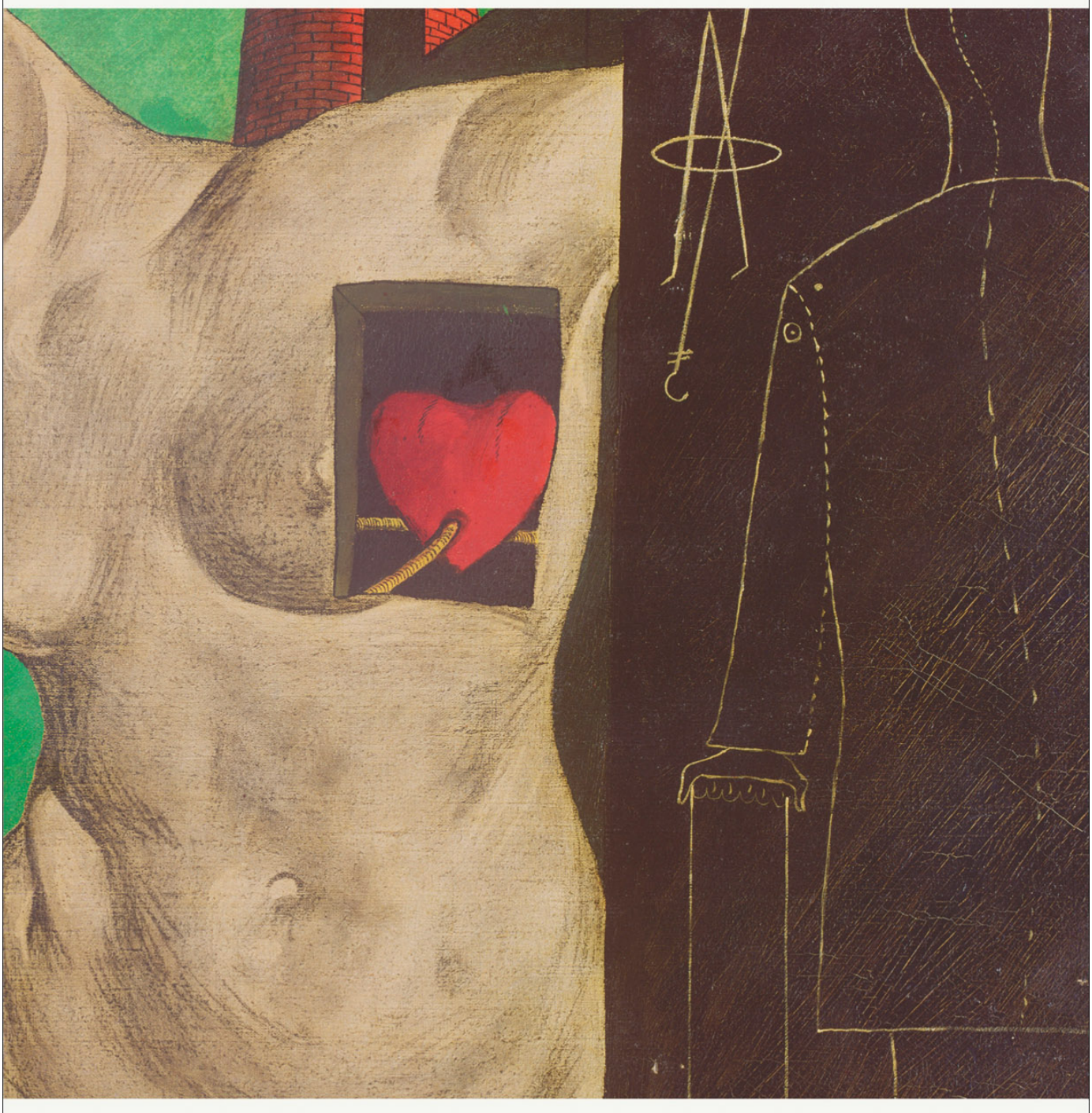
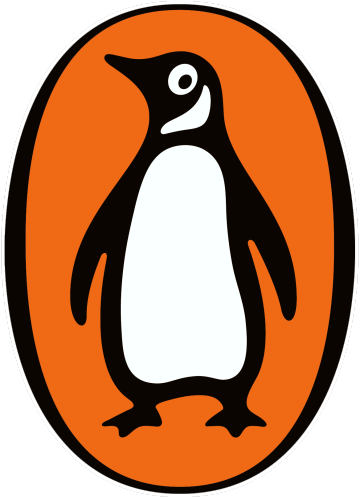
MODERN CLASSICS

'Lispector had an ability to write as though no one had ever written before' Colm Tóibín

Clarice Lispector

Hour of the Star





Clarice Lispector

THE HOUR OF THE STAR
(A HORA DA ESTRELA)

Translated from the Portuguese by Benjamin Moser
Introduction by Colm Tóibín

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About the Author

Clarice Lispector was a Brazilian novelist and short story writer. Her innovation in fiction brought her international renown. References to her literary work pervade the music and literature of Brazil and Latin America. She was born in the Ukraine in 1920, but in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Civil War, the family fled to Romania and eventually sailed to Brazil. She published her first novel, *Near to the Wildheart* in 1943 when she was just twenty-three, and the next year was awarded the Graça Aranha Prize for the best first novel. Many felt she had given Brazillian literature a unique voice in the larger context of Portuguese literature. After living variously in Italy, the UK, Switzerland and the US, in 1959, Lispector returned with her children to Brazil where she wrote her most influential novels including *The Passion According to G.H.* She died in 1977, shortly after the publication of her final novel, *The Hour of the Star*.

A Passion for the Void

IN JANUARY 1963, ELIZABETH BISHOP WROTE TO ROBERT Lowell from Rio de Janeiro about the stories of Clarice Lispector. "I have translated five of Clarice's stories," she wrote, "all the short ones & one longer one. *The New Yorker* is interested—I think she needs money, so that would be good, the $ being what it is … But at the moment—just when I was ready to send off the batch, except for one, she has vanished on me—completely—and for about six weeks! … I am mystified … It is 'temperament,' maybe, or more likely just the usual "massive inertia" that one runs into at every turn … in the stories she has awfully good things and they do sound pretty good in English, and I was quite pleased with them."

In June 1963, Bishop wrote again about Lispector: "Clarice has been asked to another literary congress, at the University of Texas, and is being very coy & complicated—but I think is secretly very proud—and is going, of course. I'll help her with her speech. I suppose we are going to be 'friends'—but she's the most non-literary writer I've ever known, and 'never cracks a book' as we used to say. She's never read anything that I can discover—I think she's a 'self-taught' writer, like a primitive painter."

In Bishop's *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, published by the Library of America, there are three translations from Lispector, including the astonishing story "The Smallest Woman in the World," which has both the primitive power which Bishop noted, but also a real and artful knowingness, a sense of what can be done with tone, with paragraph endings, with dialogue, that could only belong to someone deeply literary. Lispector had, in common with Borges in his fiction, an ability to write as though no one had ever written before, as though the work's originality and freshness arrived in the world quite unexpected, like the egg laid in Lispector's story "A Hen," which Bishop also translated.

The idea of Lispector as fleeting, oddly unreliable, complicated, someone who could vanish, as Bishop would have it, is essential to her work and her reputation. Clarice Lispector (1920–1977) was born in the Ukraine but arrived as a child in Brazil. Her background in the Ukraine and her Jewish family's escape from there are described in harrowing detail by Benjamin Moser in his brilliant biography *Why This World*. What Moser calls "her inflexible individuality" made Lispector a subject of fascination to those around her, and to readers, but there was always a sense that she was deeply mystified by the world, and uncomfortable with life itself, as indeed with narrative.

In October 1977, shortly before her death, she published the novella *The Hour of the Star* in which all her talents and eccentricities merged and folded in a densely self-conscious narrative dealing with the difficulty and odd pleasures of storytelling and then proceeding, when it could, to tell the story of Macabéa, a woman who, Lispector told an interviewer, "was so poor that all she ate were hot dogs." But she made clear that this was "not the story, though. The story is about a crushed innocence, about an anonymous misery."

The story is also about a woman from the state of Alagoas in the northeast of Brazil—the Lispectors first lived there when they came to the country—who then goes to live in Rio de Janeiro, as Clarice Lispector did. In a scene toward the end of the book, the heroine goes to a fortune-teller, Madame Carlota, just as Lispector herself went to a fortune-teller. Lispector told a TV interviewer: "I went to a fortune-teller who told me about all kinds of good things that were about to happen to me, and on the way home in the taxi I thought it'd be really funny if a taxi hit me and ran me over and I died after hearing all those good things."

This is not to suggest that the story is autobiographical; rather it is an exploration of a self that is sometimes glimpsed, but barely known. At the time when Lispector was writing the book, she was herself glimpsed by the writer José Castello on Avenida Copacabana in Rio looking into a shop window. When he greeted her, he wrote, "it takes her a while to turn around. She doesn't move at first, but then, before I dare repeat the greeting, she turns slowly, as if to see where something frightening had come from, and says 'So it's you.' At that moment, horrified, I notice that there is nothing in the shop window but undressed mannequins. But then my silly horror becomes a conclusion: Clarice had a passion for the void."

The self re-created in a form of radical uncertainty is not merely the young woman from the northeast who is, ostensibly, the subject of the novel, but the narrator too is also a self re-created. He is capable of awkward asides, over-confidence in his own method, pure fear in the face of the power and powerlessness of words, and then sudden passages of soaring beauty and stark definition. He is capable of a paragraph such as: "Meanwhile the clouds are white and the sky is all blue. Why so much God. Why not a little for men." or "Meanwhile—the silent constellations and the space which is time which has nothing to do with her and with us."

The Hour of the Star is like being brought backstage during the performance of a play and allowed odd glimpses of the actors and the audience, and further and more intense glimpses of the mechanics of the theater—the scene and costume changes, the creation of artifice—with many interruptions by the backstage staff. It is to be told in ironic, maybe mocking, whispers by the box office on the way out that those glimpses were in fact the whole performance, plotted out with care and attention by a writer who is still nervously watching from somewhere close, or somewhere in the distance, who may or may not even exist.

Nothing is stable in the text. The voice of the narrator moves from the darkest wondering about existence and God to almost comic wandering around in his character; he is watching her, entering her mind, listening to her and then standing back. He is filled with pity and sympathy for her case—her poverty, her innocence, her body, how much she does not know and cannot imagine—but he is also alert to the writing of fiction itself as an activity which demands tricks that he, the poor narrator, simply does not possess, or does not find useful. At times, on the other hand, he is in possession of too many of them. It is hard to decide who to feel more sorry for, Macabéa or the narrator, the innocent victim of life, or the highly self-conscious victim of his own failure. The one who knows too little, or the one who knows too much.

The narrative moves from a set of broad strokes about character and scene, with throwaway moments and casual statements which sum up and analyze, to aphorisms about life and death and the mystery of time and God. It moves from a deep awareness about the tragedy of being alive to a sly allowance for the fact that existence is a comedy. The story is set both in a Brazil that is almost too real in the limits it sets on the characters' lives and a Brazil of the mind and the imagination, made vast by the way in which

words and images, and shifts of tone and texture, are deployed by Lispector in her mysterious swan song.

As the French critic Hélène Cixous has written, *The Hour of the Star* "is a text on poverty that is not poor." It has a way of being knowing and mysterious, garrulous and oddly refined. It withholds and it tells too much. It makes sweeping judgments and tiny observations. It is a meditation on two types of powerlessness, each one stark and distinct. The first is the powerlessness of the narrator, someone who has words at his disposal but who feels that words, in all their uncertainty and shiftiness, will dispose of him. He is not sure whether this should make him laugh or cry; instead he remains in an odd, frightened state with strange bursts of pure determination. And then there is the powerlessness of the character he has imagined, or seen, or allowed the words, in all their frailty and foolishness, to conjure up.

But there are times when the narrator forgets himself, as Beckett often does, and finds something too interesting or too grotesquely funny to be bothered about questioning its role in the narrative, its truth or its fictiveness. The memory, for example, that the protagonist had once eaten "fried cat," or the sights and sounds of the street in Rio, or certain memories. Or Macabéa's pronouncement: "I'll miss myself so bad when I die."

Most late work has a spectral beauty, a sense of form and content dancing a slow and skillful waltz with each other. Lispector, on the other hand, as she came to the end of her life, wrote as though her life was beginning, with a sense of a need to stir and shake narrative itself to see where it might take her, as the bewildered and original writer that she was, and us, her bewildered and excited readers.

COLM TÓIBÍN

Dedication by the Author

(actually Clarice Lispector)

SO I DEDICATE THIS THING HERE TO OLD SCHUMANN and his sweet Clara who today alas are bones. I dedicate it to the very crimson color scarlet like my blood of a man in his prime and so I dedicate it to my blood. I dedicate it above all to the gnomes, dwarfs, sylphs, and nymphs who inhabit my life. I dedicate it to the memory of my former poverty, when everything was more sober and dignified and I had never eaten lobster. I dedicate it to the tempest of Beethoven. To the vibrations of the neutral colors of Bach. To Chopin who makes me swoon. To Stravinsky who frightened me and with whom I soared in fire. To *Death and Transfiguration* in which Richard Strauss reveals to me a destiny? Most of all I dedicate it to the yesterdays of today and to today, to the transparent veil of Debussy, to Marlos Nobre, to Prokofiev, to Carl Orff and Schoenberg, to the twelve-tone composers, to the strident cries of the electronic generation—to all those who reached the most alarmingly unsuspected regions within me, all those prophets of the present and who have foretold me to myself until in that instant I exploded into: I. This I that is all of you since I can't stand being just me, I need others in order to get by, fool that I am, I all askew, anyway what can you do besides meditate to fall into that full void you can only reach through meditation. Meditation doesn't need results: meditation can be an end in itself. I meditate wordlessly and upon the nothing. What trips up my life is writing.

And—and don't forget that the structure of the atom cannot be seen but is nonetheless known. I know about lots of things I've never seen. And so do you. You can't show proof of the truest thing of all, all you can do is believe. Weep and believe.

This story takes place during a state of emergency and a public calamity. It's an unfinished book because it's still waiting for an answer. An answer I

hope someone in the world can give me. You? It’s a story in Technicolor to add a little luxury which, by God, I need too. Amen for all of us.

THE HOUR OF THE STAR

IT'S ALL MY FAULT

OR

THE HOUR OF THE STAR

OR

LET HER DEAL WITH IT

OR

THE RIGHT TO SCREAM

.AS FOR THE FUTURE.

OR

SINGING THE BLUES

OR

SHE DOESN'T KNOW HOW TO SCREAM

OR

A SENSE OF LOSS

OR

WHISTLING IN THE DARK WIND

OR

I CAN'T DO ANYTHING

OR

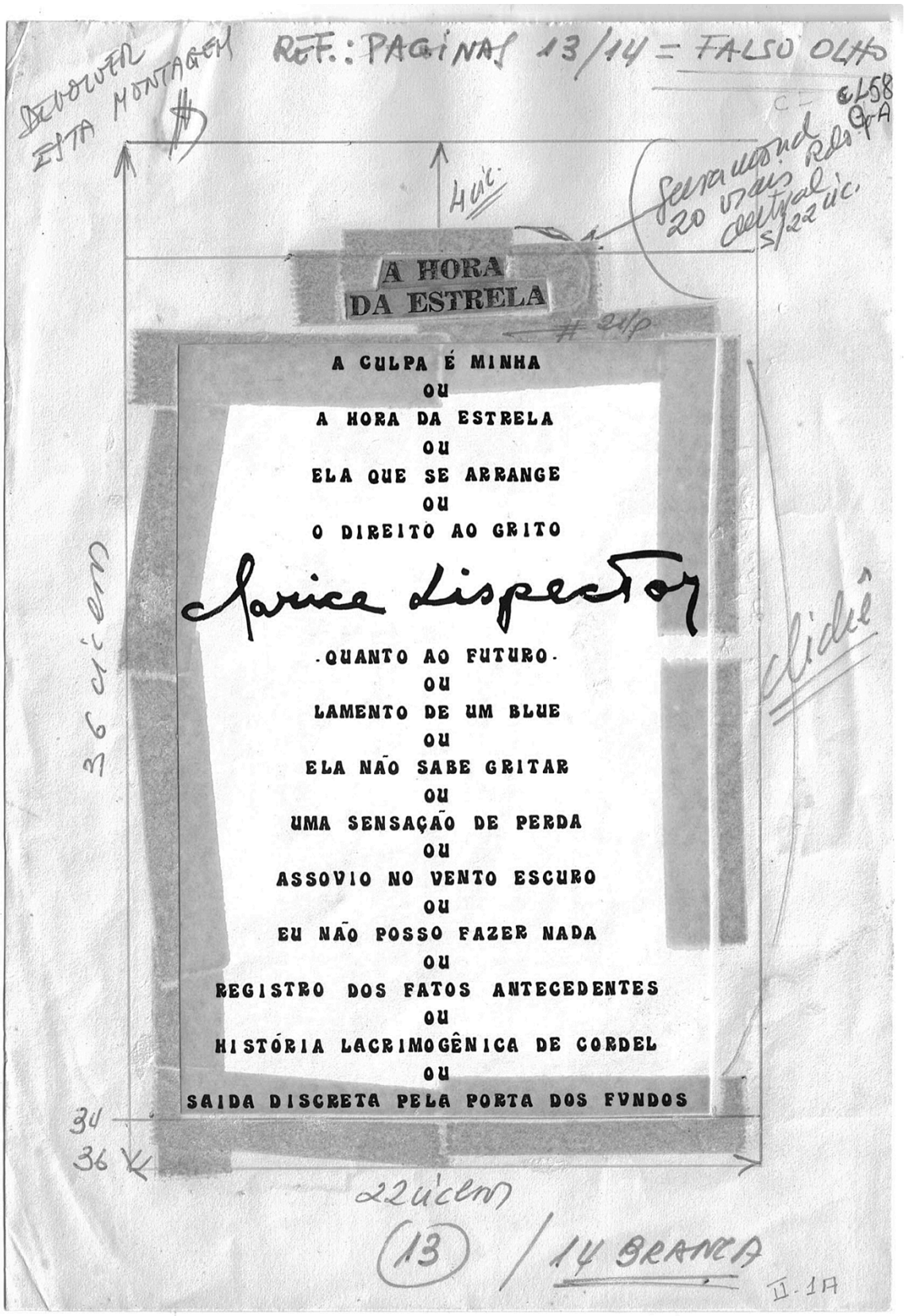
ACCOUNT OF THE PRECEDING FACTS

OR

CHEAP TEARJERKER

OR

DISCREET EXIT THROUGH THE BACK DOOR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4 cíc.
Seria usado 20 vezes Rds central s/22 cíc.
A HORA DA ESTRELA
A CULPA É MINHA
OU
A HORA DA ESTRELA
OU
ELA QUE SE ARRANGE
OU
O DIREITO AO GRITO
Clarice Lispector
·QUANTO AO FUTURO·
OU
LAMENTO DE UM BLUE
OU
ELA NÃO SABE GRITAR
OU
UMA SENSAÇÃO DE PERDA
OU
ASSOVIO NO VENTO ESCURO
OU
EU NÃO POSSO FAZER NADA
OU
REGISTRO DOS FATOS ANTECEDENTES
OU
HISTÓRIA LACRIMOGÊNICA DE CORDEL
OU
SAIDA DISCRETA PELA PORTA DOS FUNDOS
36 cíceros
34
36
22 cíceros
(13) / 14 BRANCA

ALL THE WORLD BEGAN WITH A YES. ONE MOLECULE said yes to another molecule and life was born. But before pre-history there was the prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes. It was ever so. I don't know why, but I do know that the universe never began.

Make no mistake, I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort.

As long as I have questions and no answers I'll keep on writing. How do you start at the beginning, if things happen before they happen? If before the pre-prehistory there were already the apocalyptic monsters? If this story doesn't exist now, it will. Thinking is an act. Feeling is a fact. Put the two together—I am the one writing what I am writing. God is the world. Truth is always an interior and inexplicable contact. My truest life is unrecognizable, extremely interior and there is not a single word that defines it. My heart has emptied itself of every desire and been reduced to its own final or primary beat. The toothache that runs through this story has given me a sharp stab in the middle of our mouth. So high-pitched I sing a strident and syncopated melody—it's my own pain, I who carry the world and there is a lack of happiness. Happiness? I never saw a dumber word, invented by all those northeastern girls out there.

As I'll now explain, this story will be the result of a gradual vision—for the last two and a half years I've been slowly discovering the whys. It's the vision of the imminence of. Of what? Maybe I'll figure it out later. Just as I'm writing at the very same time I'm being read. I only don't start with the end that would justify the beginning—as death seems to comment on life—because I have to record the preceding facts.

I'm writing in this instant with a bit of previous modesty because I'm invading you with such an exterior and explicit narrative. Out of which however blood so pantingly full of life might ooze and instantly congeal in cubes of trembling jelly. Will this story someday become my own congealing? How do I know. If there's any truth in it—and of course the story is true though invented—may everyone recognize it inside himself because all of us are one and he who is not poor in money is poor in spirit or longing because he lacks something more precious than gold—there are those who lack the delicate essential.

How do I know everything that's about to come and that I myself still don't know, since I never lived it? Because on a street in Rio de Janeiro I glimpsed in the air the feeling of perdition on the face of a northeastern girl. Not to mention that I as a boy grew up in the northeast. I also know about things because I'm alive. Everyone alive knows, even if they don't know they know. So you gentlemen know more than you think and are just pretending not to.

I do not intend for what I'm about to write to be complex, though I'll have to use the words that sustain you. The story—I determine with false free will—will have around seven characters and I'm obviously one of the more important. I, Rodrigo S. M. An old tale, this, since I don't want to be all modern and invent trendy words to make myself look original. So that's why I'll try contrary to my normal habits to write a story with a beginning, middle and "grand finale" followed by silence and falling rain.

An exterior and explicit story, yes, but which contains secrets—starting with one of the titles, "As For The Future", which is preceded by a period and followed by another period. This isn't just a notion of mine—at the end perhaps you'll understand the need to delimit. (I'm barely starting to make out the ending which, my poverty permitting, I'd like to be grandiose.) If instead of a period it were followed by ellipses, the title would be open to possible imaginings of yours, perhaps even depraved and pitiless. Anyway, it's true that I too have no pity for my main character, the northeastern girl: it's a story I want to be cold. But I have the right to be sadly cold, and you don't. So that's why I won't let you. This isn't just a narrative, it's above all primary life that breathes, breathes, breathes. Porous material, one day I shall live here the life of a molecule with its possible bang of atoms. What I write is more than mere invention, it's my obligation to tell about this one girl out of the thousands like her. And my duty, however artlessly, to reveal her life.

Because there's the right to scream.

So I scream.

A pure scream and without begging alms. I know there are girls who sell their bodies, their only real possession, in exchange for a good dinner instead of a bologna sandwich. But the person I'm going to talk about scarcely has a body to sell, nobody wants her, she's a virgin and harmless, nobody would miss her. Moreover—I realize now—nobody would miss me

either. And even what I'm writing somebody else could write. A male writer, that is, because a woman would make it all weepy and maudlin.

Like the northeastern girl, there are thousands of girls scattered throughout the tenement slums, vacancies in beds in a room, behind the shop counters working to the point of exhaustion. They don't even realize how easily substitutable they are and that they could just as soon drop off the face of the earth. Few protest and as far as I know they never complain since they don't know to whom. Does this whom exist?

I am warming up my body to get started, rubbing my hands together to work up the nerve. I just remembered a time when to warm up my spirit I prayed: movement is spirit. Prayer was a means of mutely and hidden from others reaching myself. When I prayed I achieved an emptiness of soul—and that emptiness is all I can ever have. Besides that, nothing. But the emptiness has the value and the appearance of plenty. One way of getting is not looking, one way of having is not asking and only believing that the silence I believe to be inside me is the answer to my—to my mystery.

I intend, as I earlier suggested, to write in an ever simpler way. Anyway the material I've got is too plain and meager, the information about my characters sparse and not very elucidating, this information that painstakingly comes from me to myself, it's a carpenter's job.

Yes, but don't forget that to write anything at all my basic material is the word. So that's why this story will be made of words that gather in sentences and from these a secret meaning emanates that goes beyond words and sentences. Naturally, like every writer I'm tempted to use succulent terms: I know splendid adjectives, meaty nouns, and verbs so slender that they travel sharp through the air about to go into action, since words are actions, don't you agree? I'm not going to adorn the word because if I touch the girl's bread the bread will turn to gold—and the girl (she's nineteen) the girl wouldn't be able to bite it, dying of hunger. So I have to speak simply to capture her delicate and vague existence. I humbly limit myself—without trumpeting my humility for then it wouldn't be humble—I limit myself to telling of the lame adventures of a girl in a city that's entirely against her. She who should have stayed in the backlands of Alagoas in a cotton dress and without any typewriter, since she wrote so badly, she only had three years of school. Because she was so ignorant she had to type slowly letter by letter—her aunt was who gave her a crash course in typing. And the girl had acquired a dignity: she was at last a

typist. Although, apparently, she didn't approve of two consonants together and copied from the lovely and round handwriting of her beloved boss the word "designate" as she would have said it: "desiginate".

Forgive me but I'm going to keep talking about me who am unknown to myself, and as I write I'm a bit surprised because I discover I have a destiny. Who hasn't ever wondered: am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person?

Before that, I want to declare that this girl doesn't know herself except from living aimlessly. If she was dumb enough to ask herself "who am I?" she would fall flat on her face. Because "who am I?" creates a need. And how can you satisfy that need? Those who wonder are incomplete.

The person I'm going to talk about is so dumb that she sometimes smiles at other people on the street. Nobody smiles back because they don't even look at her.

Coming back to me: what I am about to write can't be absorbed by minds that are very demanding and covet refinement. Since what I'm saying will just be naked. Though in the background—and even now—it has the tormented shadow that is always in my dreams when at night tormented I sleep. So don't expect stars in what's coming: nothing will twinkle, this is opaque material and by its very nature despised by everyone. That's because this story lacks a *cantabile* melody. Its rhythm is sometimes discordant. And it has facts. I suddenly fell for facts without literature—facts are hard stones and action is now more interesting to me than thinking, you can't get away from facts.

I wonder if I should jump ahead and sketch out an ending right away. But it so happens that I myself have no idea how this thing will turn out. And also because I realize that I have to proceed step by step according to a term measured in hours: even an animal has to deal with time. And this is also my most primary condition: to go along gently despite my impatience with that girl.

With this story I'm going to sensitize myself, and I am well aware that each day is a day stolen from death. I am not an intellectual, I write with my body. And what I write is a moist fog. Words are sounds transfused with unequal shadows that intersect, stalactites, lace, transfigured organ music. I hardly dare shout out words at this vibrant and rich, morbid and dark web which has its countertone in the thick bass of pain. Allegro con brio. I'll try to wrest gold from charcoal. I know that I'm putting off the story and

playing ball without a ball. Is the fact an act? I swear this book is made without words. It is a mute photograph. This book is a silence. This book is a question.

But I suspect that all this chitchat is made just to put off the poverty of the story, because I'm scared. Before this typist turned up in my life, I was a man who was even a bit contented, despite my meager success in literature. Things were somehow so good that they could go very bad because fully mature things rot.

So suddenly the idea of surpassing my own limits fascinated me. And that's when I thought about writing about reality, since reality was so beyond me. Whatever "reality" means. Will what I'm about to narrate sound treacly? It might but then this very second I'll dry out and harden. And at least what I'm writing begs no favors and asks for no help: it puts up with so-called pain with the dignity of a baron.

Anyway. It seems that I'm changing the way I write. But it so happens that I only write what I want, I'm not a professional—and I have to write about this northeastern girl or I'll choke. She's accusing me and the way to defend myself is to write about her. I write in bold and severe painter's strokes. I'll be dealing with facts as if they were the irremediable stones I spoke of earlier. Even though to get me going I want bells to peal while I guess at reality. And may angels flutter as transparent wasps around my hot head because this head wants finally to transform itself into an object-thing, it's easier.

Could it really be that the action is beyond the word?

But when I write—let things be known by their real names. Each thing is a word and when there is no word it is invented. This your God who commanded us to invent.

Why do I write? First of all because I captured the spirit of the language and that's why sometimes the form is what makes the content. So I'm not writing for the northeastern girl but for the serious reason of "force majeure", or as they say in official documents, by "force of law".

Yes, my strength is in solitude. I'm not afraid of pouring rains or great gusts of wind, for I too am the darkness of the night. Darkness? I recall a girlfriend: she was experienced and what darkness inside her body. I never forgot her: you never forget the person you slept with. The event remains tattooed with a fiery mark on living flesh and all who glimpse the stigma flee in horror.

Now I want to speak of the northeastern girl. This is what I mean: she like a stray dog was guided exclusively by herself. I too, from one failure to the next have reduced myself to myself but at least I want to encounter the world and its God.

I'd like to add by way of information about the young girl and myself, that we live exclusively in the present because it is always eternally today and tomorrow will be a today, eternity is the state of things at this very moment.

And I just got fearful when I put down words about the northeastern girl. And the question is: how do I write? I can confirm that I write by ear as I learned English and French by ear. Any antecedents as a writer? I'm a man who has more money than people who go hungry, which somehow makes me dishonest. And I only lie precisely when it's time to lie. But I don't lie when I write. What else? Yes, I have no social class, marginalized as I am. The upper class considers me a weird monster, the middle class worries I might unsettle them, the lower class never comes to me.

No, it's not easy to write. It's as hard as breaking rocks. But sparks and splinters fly like flashing steel.

Oh I'm so afraid to start and don't even know the girl's name. Not to mention that the story drives me to despair because it's too simple. What I plan to tell seems easy and accessible to everyone. But its elaboration is very difficult. Since I have to make clear something that's almost erased and that I can hardly see. With hands with muddy hard fingers to feel for the invisible in the mud itself.

I'm sure of one thing: this narrative will deal with something delicate: the creation of a whole person who surely is as alive as I am. Take care of her because all I can do is show her so you can recognize her on the street, walking lightly because of her quivering thinness. And what if my narrative is sad? Afterwards I'll surely write something cheerful, though why cheerful? Because I too am a man of hosannas and someday, perhaps, I'll sing praises instead of the difficulties of the northeastern girl.

For now I want to walk naked or in rags, I want to try at least once the lack of taste that they say is in the host. Eating the host will be tasting the flavorlessness of the world and bathing in the no. This will be my courage, to abandon old already comfortable feelings.

It's not comfortable now: to speak of the girl I can't shave for days and must acquire dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep, nodding off

from sheer exhaustion, I am a manual laborer. Besides wearing old ragged clothes. All in order to put myself on the northeastern girl's level. But still aware that I might have to present myself in a more convincing way to the societies that demand a great deal of the person sitting here typing.

All this, yes, the story is history. But knowing beforehand so you never forget that the word is the fruit of the word, the word must resemble the word. Reaching it is my first duty to myself. And the word can't be dressed up and artistically vain, it can only be itself. Well, it's true that I also wanted to arrive at a sheer sensation and for it to be so sheer that it couldn't break into a perpetual line. At the same time that I want to arrive at the thickest and lowest, deepest and earth trombone, so much for no good reason that out of nervousness in writing I burst out in an uncontrollable laugh coming straight from my chest. And I want to accept my freedom without thinking what so many do, that existing is something for fools, a case of madness. Because that's what it seems like. Existing isn't logical.

The action of this story will end up with my transfiguration into somebody else and my materialization finally as an object. Yes, and it might even reach the sweet flute around which I will entwine myself like a supple liana.

But let's get back to today. Because, as we know, today is today. You're not understanding me and I darkly hear you laughing at me with the quick and rasping laugh of the old. And I hear measured footsteps in the street. I'm trembling with fear. Just as well that what I'm about to write is already somehow written within me. What I have to do is copy myself out with the delicacy of a white butterfly. This idea of the white butterfly comes because, if the girl gets married, she'll marry thin and light, and, as a virgin, in white. Maybe she won't get married? The fact is I hold a destiny in my hands yet don't feel powerful enough to invent freely: I follow a hidden, fatal line. I have to seek a truth that is beyond me. Why should I write about a young girl whose poverty isn't even adorned? Maybe because within her there's a seclusion and also because in the poverty of body and spirit I touch holiness, I who want to feel the breath of my beyond. To be more than I am, since I am so little.

I write because I have nothing else to do in the world: I was left over and there is no place for me in the world of men. I write because I'm desperate and I'm tired, I can no longer bear the routine of being me and if not for the

always novelty that is writing, I would die symbolically every day. But I am prepared to slip out discreetly through the back exit. I've experienced almost everything, including passion and its despair. And now I'd only like to have what I would have been and never was.

I seem to know the tiniest details about this northeastern girl, after all I live with her and because I've guessed so much about her, she's stuck to my skin like some sticky treacle or black mud. When I was a boy I read the story of an old man who was afraid to cross a river. That's when a young man appeared who also wanted to cross to the other side. The old man seized the opportunity and said:

—Will you take me too? Carried on your shoulders?

The youth agreed and once they were across said to the old man:

—Here we are, you can get down now.

But the old man answered very sly and wise:

—Not a chance! It's so nice up here that I'll never leave you again!

Well the typist doesn't want to get off my shoulders. Me of all people who realizes that poverty is ugly and promiscuous. That's why I don't know if my story is going to be—be what? I don't know anything, I still haven't worked up the nerve to write it. Will things happen? They will. But what things? I don't know that either. I'm not trying to create in you some afflicted, voracious expectation: I really don't know what awaits me, I have a fidgety character on my hands and who escapes me at every turn expecting me to retrieve her.

I forgot to say that everything I'm now writing is accompanied by the emphatic ruffle of a drum being beaten by a soldier. The moment I start my story—suddenly the drum will cease.

I see the northeastern girl looking in the mirror and—a ruffle of the drum—in the mirror appears my weary and unshaven face. We're that interchangeable. There's no doubt she's a physical person. And I'll venture a fact: she's never seen herself naked because she was ashamed. Ashamed because she's modest or because she's ugly? I also wonder how to cope with facts and facts. Because all of a sudden the figurative fascinated me: I create human action and I tremble. I also want the figurative like a painter who only paints abstract colors but wants to show that he does so because he chooses to, not because he can't draw. To draw the girl I have to get a grip on myself and to capture her soul I have to feed myself frugally with

fruits and drink iced white wine because it's hot in this cubbyhole I've locked myself into and from which I'm inclined to want to see the world. I've also had to give up sex and soccer. Not to mention that I avoid all human contact. Will I someday return to my former way of life? I very much doubt it. I now see that I forgot to mention that for the time being I read nothing for fear of polluting the simplicity of my language with luxuries. Since as I said the word has to resemble the word, my instrument. Or am I not a writer? Actually I'm more of an actor because with only one way to punctuate, I juggle with intonation and force another's breathing to accompany my text.

I also forgot to say that the account that is soon going to have to start—since I can no longer withstand the pressure of the facts—the account that soon is going to have to start is written with the sponsorship of the most popular soft drink in the world even though it's not paying me a cent, a soft drink distributed in every country. Moreover it's the same soft drink that sponsored the last earthquake in Guatemala. Even though it tastes like nail polish, Aristolino soap and chewed plastic. None of this keeps everyone from loving it with servility and subservience. Also because—and now I'm going to say something difficult that only I understand—because this drink which contains coca is today. It's a way for a person to be up-to-date and in the now.

As for the girl, she lives in an impersonal limbo, without reaching the worst or the best. She just lives, inhaling and exhaling, inhaling and exhaling. Actually—why should she do anything more? Her existence is sparse. Yes. But why should I be feeling guilty? And trying to rid myself of the weight of not having done anything concrete to help the girl? That girl—and I see that I'm almost into the story—that girl who slept in cheap cotton underwear with rather suspicious faint blood stains. To fall asleep on cold winter nights she curled in upon herself, receiving and giving herself her own paltry warmth. She slept with her mouth open because of her stuffed nose, she slept exhausted, she slept dead to the world.

I have to add a little something that's very important for understanding the narrative: that it's accompanied from beginning to end by a very slight and constant toothache, something to do with chipped enamel. I also guarantee that the story will be accompanied by the plangent violin played

by a thin man right on the street corner. His face is narrow and yellow as if he'd already died. And maybe he had.

All this I've explained at great length for fear of having promised too much and then giving only the simple and the small. Since this story is almost nothing. The thing to do is to start all of a sudden just as I jump all of a sudden into the icy water of the sea, a way of facing with suicidal courage the intense cold. I'm about to begin halfway saying that—

—that she was incompetent. Incompetent for life. She had never figured out how to figure things out. She was only vaguely beginning to know the kind of absence she had of herself inside her. If she were an expressive creature she would say: the world is outside me, I am outside me. (It's going to be hard to write this story. Even though I don't have anything to do with the girl, I'll have to write out all of myself through her amidst frights of my own. The facts are sonorous but between the facts there's a whispering. It's the whispering that astounds me.)

She never figured out how to figure things out. So much (explosion) that she had nothing to say for herself when the boss of the pulley-distribution firm rudely warned her (a rudeness she seemed to be asking for with that dumb face, a face just asking to be slapped), rudely that he was only going to keep Glória, her co-worker, because as for her, she made too many typing mistakes, besides invariably dirtying the pages. That's what he said. As for the girl, she thought that to show respect she needed to say something and spoke ceremoniously to her secretly beloved boss:

—Forgive me for the trouble, sir.

Mr. Raimundo Silveira—who by now had already turned his back—looked around a bit surprised by the unexpected politeness. And something in the typist's almost smiling face made him say less rudely, though grudgingly:

—Well, you don't have to leave right away, you might even stick around a while.

After receiving this warning she went to the bathroom to be alone because she was all shaken. She mechanically looked at herself in the mirror atop the filthy and cracked sink, full of hairs, which matched her own life so well. It seemed to her that the dark and tarnished mirror didn't reflect any image. Could her physical existence have vanished? This illusion immediately passed and she made out her face entirely distorted by

the cheap little mirror, her nose as huge as a clown's papier-mâché nose. She looked at herself and lightly thought: so young and already rusted.

(Some people have got it. And some people don't. It's very simple: the girl didn't. Didn't have what? Exactly that: she didn't. If you see what I'm saying, fine. If you don't, that's fine too. But why am I bothering with this girl when what I want more than anything is purely ripe and golden wheat in summer?)

When she was little her aunt to punish her with fear told her that the vampire-man—the one who sucks people's blood by biting them in the flesh of the neck—has no reflection in the mirror. She reckoned that it wouldn't be so bad to be a vampire because the blood might give a touch of pink to her sallow complexion, she who didn't seem to have any blood unless one day she might have to spill it.

The girl had slumped shoulders like those of a darning-woman. She'd learned to darn as a child. She might have come farther in life if she had devoted herself to the delicate task of mending, maybe even mending silk. Or luxurious fabrics: nice shiny satin, a kiss of souls. Little darning mosquito. A grain of sugar carried on an ant's back. There was something slightly idiotic about her, but she wasn't an idiot. She didn't know she was unhappy. That's because she believed. In what? In you, but you don't have to believe in anyone or anything—you just have to believe. That sometimes gave her the state of grace. She'd never lost faith.

(She makes me so uncomfortable that I feel hollow. I'm hollow of that girl. And the more uncomfortable she makes me the less she demands. I'm angry. So enraged I could smash cups and dishes and break windows. How can I avenge myself? Or rather, how can I make up for it? I've got it: by loving my dog who has more food than that girl. Why doesn't she react? Can't she grow a backbone? No, she is sweet and obedient.)

She also saw two enormous, round, bulging, and inquisitive eyes—her gaze was that of someone with a broken wing. Some thyroid issue, eyes that asked. Who was she asking? God? She didn't think about God, God didn't think about her. God belongs to those who manage to get him. God appears when you're distracted. She didn't ask questions. She guessed that there were no answers. Was she dumb enough to ask? And get a "no" right in her face? Maybe the empty question was just so that someday nobody could say to her that she'd never even bothered to ask. Since there wasn't anyone to answer she herself seemed to have answered: that's how it is because that's

how it is. Is there another answer in the world? If anyone knows a better one speak up and tell me, I've been waiting for years.

Meanwhile the clouds are white and the sky is all blue. Why so much God. Why not a little for men.

She'd been born with a rap sheet and now looked like the daughter of nobody in particular apologizing for taking up space. In the mirror she distractedly examined close up the blotches on her face. In Alagoas they were called "panos", they said it was something to do with the liver. She concealed her panos with a thick layer of white powder and if that made her look whitewashed it was better than looking drab. All of her was a bit grimy since she rarely washed. During the day she wore a blouse and skirt, at night she slept in her underwear. A roommate never knew how to tell her she smelled stale. And because she didn't know how, she left it at that, since she didn't want to hurt her feelings. Nothing in her was iridescent, though the parts of her skin between the blotches had a slight opal glow. Not that it mattered. Nobody looked at her on the street, she was cold coffee.

And that's how time passed for the girl. She blew her nose on the hem of her underwear. She didn't have that delicate thing called charm. I'm the only one who finds her charming. Only I, her author, love her. I suffer for her. And I'm the only one who can say this: "what do you ask of me weeping that I wouldn't give you singing"? That girl didn't know she was what she was, just as a dog doesn't know it's a dog. So she didn't feel unhappy. The only thing she wanted was to live. She didn't know for what, she didn't ask questions. Maybe she thought there was a little bitty glory in living. She thought people had to be happy. So she was. Before her birth was she an idea? Before her birth was she dead? And after her birth she would die? What a thin slice of watermelon.

There are a few facts to relate and I myself still don't know what I'm informing on.

Now (explosion) with a few rapid strokes I'll sketch the girl's previous life before she stood before the bathroom mirror.

She was born with rickets, a legacy of the backlands—the rap sheet I mentioned earlier. By age two her parents were dead of the bad fevers of the backlands of Alagoas, there where the devil lost his boots. Much later she went to Maceió with her sanctimonious aunt, her only relative in the wide world. Every once in a while she'd remember something she'd forgotten. For example her aunt rapping her upside the head because, her aunt

imagined, the crown of the head must be an essential point. She always used her knuckles to rap that head with its bones weak from a calcium deficiency. She hit her but not only because the beatings gave her great sensual pleasure—the aunt who hadn't married since the idea disgusted her—she also considered it her duty to see the girl didn't end up like all those girls in Maceió standing on street corners with lit cigarettes waiting for men. Though the girl had shown no signs of turning into a hooker. Since even the fact of becoming a woman didn't seem to belong to her vocation. Puberty came late because even weeds long for the sun. She'd forgotten the beatings because if you wait a while pain ends up going away. What hurt more was being deprived of her daily dessert, guava preserve with cheese, the only passion in her life. Wouldn't you know that punishing her that way became her sly old aunt's favorite method? The girl didn't wonder why she was always being punished but you don't have to know everything and not knowing was an important part of her life.

That not-knowing might seem awful but it's not that bad because she knew lots of things in the way nobody teaches a dog to wag his tail or a person to feel hungry; you're born and you just know. Just as nobody one day would teach her how to die: yet she'd surely die one day as if she'd learned the starring role by heart. For at the hour of death a person becomes a shining movie star, it's everyone's moment of glory and it's when as in choral chanting you hear the whooshing shrieks.

When she was small she'd dearly longed for a pet. But her aunt thought that an animal was one more mouth to feed. So the girl invented that all she could do was breed fleas since she didn't deserve the love of a dog. From the contact with her aunt she'd acquired a drooping head. But the piety didn't stick: once the aunt died, she never again entered a church because she didn't feel anything and the deities were strangers to her.

Since life's like that: you press a button and life lights up. Except she didn't know which button to press. She didn't even realize she lived in a technical society in which she was a dispensable cog. But one thing she'd upsettingly discovered: she no longer knew what it was to have a father and mother, she'd forgotten the taste. And, if she thought about it, she might say she sprouted from the soil of the Alagoas backlands like an instantly molded mushroom. She talked, yes, but was extremely mute. Sometimes I manage to get a word out of her but it slips through my fingers.

Despite her aunt's death she was sure it would be different with her, since she'd never die. (Being the other man is my passion. In this case the other woman. I shiver squalid just like her.)

Things that can be defined are starting to fatigue me a bit. I prefer the truth that is in the foreboding. When I rid myself of this story, I'll return to the more irresponsible realm of only having slight forebodings. I did not invent this girl. She forced her being upon me. She wasn't retarded by any means, she was as helpless and trusting as an idiot. The girl who at least didn't have to beg for food, there is a whole subclass that's even more lost and hungry. I alone love her.

Later—who knows why—they'd come to Rio, unbelievable Rio de Janeiro, her aunt got her a job, finally died and she, now on her own, was living in a tenement in a room with four salesgirls who worked at the Lojas Americanas.

The tenement was in an old colonial house on rough Acre Street amongst the prostitutes who served sailors, coal and cement warehouses, not far from the docks. The nasty docks made her long for the future. (What's going on? Since it's like I'm hearing the chords of a cheerful piano—could that be the symbol that the girl's life might have a splendid future? I'm pleased by the possibility and will do everything I can to make it real.)

Acre Street. But what a place. The fat rats of Acre Street. That's a place I don't set foot because I'm terrified without any shame of that dark bit of nasty life.

Every once in a while she was lucky enough to hear a rooster singing his life out and remembered the backlands nostalgically. Where could a crowing rooster fit in those parched storehouses holding wholesale import-export goods? (If the reader possesses any wealth and a comfortable life, he'll step out of himself to see how the other sometimes lives. If he's poor, he won't be reading me because reading me is superfluous for anyone who has a slight permanent hunger. Here I'm playing the role of a safety valve for you and from the massacring life of the average middle class. I'm well aware that it's frightening to step out of oneself, but everything new is frightening. Though the anonymous girl in this story is so ancient that she could be a biblical figure. She was subterranean and had never flowered. I'm lying: she was grass.)

Of the suffocating summers of oppressive Acre Street she only felt the sweat, a sweat that stank. I think there was something wrong with that

sweat. I'm not sure if she had tuberculosis, I don't think so. In the dark of the night a man whistling and heavy footsteps, the howling of the abandoned mutt. Meanwhile—the silent constellations and the space which is time which has nothing to do with her and with us. So that's how the days went by. The roosters crowing and the blood-red dawn gave fresh meaning to her withered life. In the morning there were chirping birds on Acre Street: because life sprouted from the ground, cheerful amidst the stones.

Acre Street for living, Lavradio Street for working, the docks to hang out on Sundays, the occasional whistle of a cargo ship that for some reason tugged at her heart, the occasional delicious though slightly painful rooster's crowing. The rooster was coming from the never. It came from the infinite up through her bed, giving her gratitude. Light sleep because she had a cold for almost a year. In the early mornings she had fits of hoarse coughing: she smothered it with her flimsy pillow. But her roommates—Maria da Penha, Maria Aparecida, Maria José and just Maria—didn't mind. They were too worn out by jobs no less arduous just because they were anonymous. One of them sold Coty face powder, if you can imagine. They rolled over and fell back asleep. The other girl's cough actually lulled them into an even deeper sleep. Is the sky above or below? Wondered the northeastern girl. Lying there, she didn't know. Sometimes before falling asleep she was hungry and got a little giddy thinking about a side of beef. The thing to do then was to chew paper into a pulp and swallow.

Anyway. I'm getting used to it but I still can't get a grip. My God! I get along better with animals than with people. When I see my horse free and running through the field—I feel like leaning my face against his vigorous and velvety neck and telling him the story of my life. And when I pet my dog's head—I know he doesn't expect me to make sense or explain myself.

Maybe the northeastern girl had already concluded that life is extremely uncomfortable, a soul that doesn't quite fit into the body, even a flimsy soul like hers. In her little superstitious imaginings, she thought that if by any chance she ever got a nice good taste of living—she'd suddenly cease to be the princess she was and be transformed into vermin. Because, no matter how bad her situation, she didn't want to be deprived of herself, she wanted to be herself. She thought she'd incur serious punishment and even risk dying if she took too much pleasure in life. So she protected herself from death by living less, consuming so little of her life that she'd never run out. This savings gave her a little security since you can't fall farther than the

ground. Did she feel she was living for nothing? I'm not sure, but I don't think so. Only once did she ask a tragic question: who am I? It frightened her so much that she completely stopped thinking. But I, who can't quite be her, feel that I live for nothing. I am gratuitous and pay my light, gas and phone bills. As for her, she sometimes occasionally on payday bought a rose.

This all happens in the year it is happening. And I'll only finish this difficult story when I'm too exhausted by the struggle, I'm no deserter.

Sometimes she remembered a frightening out-of-tune song that girls sang dancing in a circle—she only listened without joining in because her aunt was calling her to sweep the floor. The girls with wavy hair in pink ribbons. "I want one of your daughters marré-marré-deci." "I chose the one I wanted marré." The song was a pale ghost like a rose that is madly beautiful but mortal: pale and mortal the girl was today the soft and horrifying ghost of a childhood without balls or dolls. So she'd pretend she was running through hallways with a doll in her hand chasing a ball and laughing a lot. Her chortling was terrifying because it happened in the past and only a rotten imagination would bring it into the present, longing for what might have been and wasn't. (I warned that this was a cheap tearjerker, even though I refuse to show any mercy.)

I have to say that the girl isn't aware of me, if she was she'd have someone to pray to and that would mean salvation. But I'm fully aware of her: through this young person I scream my horror of life. Of this life I love so much.

Getting back to the girl: the luxury she allowed herself was a sip of cold coffee before bed. She paid for the luxury by waking up with heartburn.

She was quiet (not having anything to say) but she liked noises. They were life. Whereas the silence of the night was scary: as if it were about to say a fatal word. At night cars rarely passed through Acre Street, the more they honked, the better she liked it. Besides these fears, as if they weren't enough, she was also terrified of getting a bad disease down there—that, her aunt had taught her. Although her tiny ova so shriveled. So, so. But she lived in such sameness that at night she couldn't remember what happened that morning. She vaguely thought from far off and without words this: since I am, the thing to do is to be. The roosters I mentioned earlier announced yet another day of fatigue. And the hens, what were they doing? Wondered the girl. The roosters at least sang. Speaking of hens, the girl

sometimes ate a hardboiled egg in a snack bar. But her aunt had taught her that eggs were bad for the liver. So she obediently got sick, feeling pains on her left side opposite the liver. Because she was very impressionable and believed in everything that existed and everything that didn't exist too. But she didn't know how to dress up reality. For her reality was too much to be believed. Anyway the word "reality" meant nothing to her. To me either, by God.

When she slept she fitfully half-expected her aunt to knock her on the head. Or she strangely dreamed about sex, she who to all appearances was asexual. When she got up she felt guilty without knowing why, maybe because good things should be forbidden. Guilty and contented. Just in case she made herself feel guilty and mechanically prayed three Hail Marys, amen, amen, amen. She prayed but without God, she didn't know who He was and so He didn't exist.

I've just discovered that for her, besides God, reality too was very little. She could deal better with her daily unreality, living in sloooow motion, hare leeeeaping through the aaaair over hiiiill and daaaale, vagueness was her earthly world, vagueness was the insides of nature.

And she thought it was good to be sad. Not miserable, since she'd never felt that way because she was modest and simple but that indefinable thing as if she were romantic. Of course she was neurotic, that goes without saying. It was a neurosis that kept her going, my God, at least that: crutches. Every once in a while she wandered into the better neighborhoods and gazed at the shop windows glittering with jewels and satin clothes—just to mortify herself a bit. Because she needed to find herself and suffering a little is a way of finding.

On Sundays she got up early in order to have more time to do nothing.

The worst moment of her life was on that day at the end of the afternoon: she'd lapse into worried meditation, the emptiness of dry Sunday. She sighed. She missed being little—manioc flour—and thought she'd been happy. Actually even the worst childhood is always enchanted, how awful. She never complained about anything, she knew that's just how things are and—who organized the land of men? Surely someday she'd deserve the heaven of the crooked where you only get in if you're warped. Anyway it's not about getting into heaven, she's crooked right here on earth. I swear I can't do anything for her. I promise you that if I could I would make things

better. I'm well aware that saying the typist has a body full of holes is more brutal than any bad word.

(As for writing, a living dog is worth far more.)

Here I should record a joy. That the girl on a Sunday without manioc flour had an unexpected happiness that was inexplicable: by the port she saw a rainbow. Feeling the light ecstasy, she immediately longed for another: she wanted to see, like once in Maceió, the popping of mute fireworks. She wanted more because it really is true that when you give that sort an inch they want the whole mile, your average Joe dreams with hunger of everything. And he wants it but has no right to it, now does he? There was no way to—at least I can't—obtain the multiplying shimmers in the drizzling rain of fireworks.

Should I say that she was crazy about soldiers? Well she was. Whenever she saw one, she thought with a shiver of pleasure: is he going to kill me?

If the girl knew that my own joy also comes from my deepest sadness and that sadness was a failed joy. Yes, she was happy inside her neurosis. War neurosis.

And she had a luxury, apart from her monthly visit to the movies: she painted her fingernails a tacky red. But since she bit them almost down to the quick the loud color was ruined immediately and you could see black dirt below.

And when she woke up? When she woke up she no longer knew who she was. Only later did she think with satisfaction: I'm a typist and a virgin, and I like coca-cola. Only then did she dress herself in herself, she spent the rest of her day obediently playing the role of being.

Would it enrich this story if I used some difficult technical terms? But there's the rub: this story has no technique, nor style, it lives from hand to mouth. I who also wouldn't stain for anything in this world with shimmering and false words a life as meager as the typist's. During the day I make, like everyone else, gestures I don't even notice myself. And one of the gestures I notice the least is this story of which I'm not guilty and which turns out however it turns out. The typist lived on a kind of stupefied nimbus, between heaven and hell. She'd never thought "I am I". I suspect she didn't think she had the right, she was a fluke. A fetus tossed in the trash in a newspaper. Are there thousands like her? Yes, and who are just flukes. If I think about it: who isn't a fluke in life. As for me, I've only escaped from being just a fluke because I write, which is an act that is a fact. That's

when I enter into contact with inner powers of mine, I find through myself your God. Why do I write? What do I know? No idea. Yes, it's true, I sometimes think that I'm not me, I seem to belong to a distant galaxy because I'm so strange to myself. Is this me? I am frightened to encounter myself.

The northeastern girl didn't believe in death, as I've said, she didn't think —since wasn't she alive? She'd forgotten her father's and mother's names, which her aunt had never mentioned. (With excessive casualness I'm using the written word and that trembles inside me who fears moving away from the Order and falling into the abyss populated with screams: the Hell of liberty. But let me go on.)

Going on:

Every morning she turned on the radio lent by one of her roommates, Maria da Penha, turning it on as low as possible so as to not disturb the others, turning it on to Clock Radio, which broadcast "the right time and culture", and no music, just dripping in sound of falling drops—each drop a minute that passed. And especially this station used those drops of minutes to run ads—she loved ads. It was the perfect station because also amongst the drops of time it gave short teachings about things she might one day need to know. That's how she learned that the Emperor Charlemagne was called Carolus in his own land. Admittedly she never found any use for this information. But you never know, patience always pays off in the end. She'd also heard that the only animal that doesn't mate with its own offspring is the horse.

—That, young man, is indecent, she said to the radio.

Another time she heard: "Repent in Christ and He will give you happiness." So she repented. Since she wasn't quite sure for what, she repented entirely and for everything. The preacher also said that seeking revenge is a mortal sin. So she didn't seek revenge.

Yes, patience always pays off in the end. Really?

She had what's known as inner life and didn't know it. She lived off herself as if eating her own entrails. When she went to work she looked like a gentle lunatic because as the bus went along she daydreamed in loud and dazzling dreams. These dreams, because of all that interiority, were empty because they lacked the essential nucleus of—of ecstasy, let's say. Most of the time she had without realizing it the void that fills the souls of the saints. Was she a saint? So it seems. She didn't know that she was

meditating because she didn't know what the word meant. But it seems to me that her life was a long meditation on the nothing. Except she needed others in order to believe in herself, otherwise she'd get lost in the successive and round emptinesses inside her. She meditated while she was typing and that's why she made even more mistakes.

But she had her pleasures. On chilly nights, shivering beneath her thin cotton sheet, she liked to read by candlelight the ads she cut out of old newspapers lying around the office. Because she collected ads. She pasted them into an album. There was one ad, the most precious of all, that showed in full color the open pot of cream for the skin of women who simply were not her. Blinking furiously (a fatal tic she had recently acquired), she just lay there imagining with delight: the cream was so appetizing that if she had the money to buy it she wouldn't be a fool. To hell with her skin, she'd eat it, that's right, in large spoonfuls straight from the jar. Because she lacked fat and her body was drier than a half-empty sack of crumbled toast. She'd become with time mere living matter in its primary form. Maybe that was to protect herself from the great temptation to go ahead and be unhappy and feel sorry for herself. (When I think that I could have been born her—and why not?—I shudder. And it seems to me a cowardly avoidance the fact that I am not, I feel guilty as I said in one of the titles.)

In any case the future seemed like it would be much better. At least the future had the advantage of not being the present, for bad things there's always something better. But there wasn't any human misery in her. Because she had within her a certain fresh flower. Since, as strange as it may seem, she believed. She was only fine organic matter. She existed. That's it. And me? The only thing known about me is that I breathe.

Although all she had inside her was the little indispensable flame: a breath of life. (I'm going through a little hell with this story. May the gods never make me describe a lazar because then I would break out in leprosy.) (If I'm delaying making the things happen that I already vaguely foresee, it's because I need to take a few snapshots of the girl from Alagoas. And also because if there's any reader for this story I'd like him to absorb this girl like a cloth soaking up water. The girl is a truth I didn't want to know about. I don't know whom to accuse but somebody has to have done it.)

Could it be that by entering the seed of her life I'm violating the secret of the pharaohs? Will I get the death penalty for speaking of a life that contains like all our lives an inviolable secret? I'm desperately trying to

find in this girl's existence at least one topaz of splendor. Maybe I'll find it in the end, I still don't know, but I have hope.

I forgot to say that sometimes the typist was nauseated by the thought of food. That came from when she was little and discovered she'd eaten fried cat. It frightened her forever more. She lost her appetite, all she had was the great hunger. It seemed to her that she'd committed a crime and that she'd eaten a fried angel, its wings snapping between her teeth. She believed in angels, and because she believed in them, they existed.

She'd never eaten lunch or dinner in a restaurant. She ate standing up at the corner bar. She had a vague idea that a woman who enters a restaurant must be French and of easy virtue.

There were things that she didn't know what they meant. One was "ephemerides". And didn't Mr. Raimundo ask her to copy from his lovely handwriting the word ephemerides or ephemeris? She thought the term ephemerides was absolutely mysterious. When she copied it she paid attention to every letter. Glória could do shorthand and not only earned more but didn't even miss a beat with those difficult words the boss loved so much. Meanwhile the girl had fallen in love with the word "ephemerides".

Another snapshot: she'd never gotten a present. Moreover, she didn't need much. But one day she saw something that for a brief moment she coveted: a book that Mr. Raimundo, who had a literary bent, had left on his desk. The title was "Humiliated and Offended". She grew thoughtful. Maybe for the first time she defined herself in a social class. She thought, thought and thought! She concluded that nobody had ever actually offended her, everything that happened was because that's how things are and there was no struggle possible, struggle for what?

I ask: will she ever someday know love's farewell? Will she ever someday know the swoonings of love? Will she take in her own way the sweet journey? I know nothing. What can you do with the truth that everyone's a little sad and a little alone. The northeastern girl got lost in the crowd. In Mauá Square, where she caught the bus it was cold and she had no shelter to protect her from the wind. Ah, but there were cargo ships that made her long for who knows what. This only sometimes. Really she left her gloomy office, faced the air outside, dusky, and realized that every day at the same time, it was exactly the same time. Irremediable the great clock that worked in time. Yes, desperately for me, the same time. Well, so what?

So what, nothing. As for me, author of a life, I can't deal with repetition: routine divides me from my possible novelties.

Speaking of novelties, the girl one day saw in a corner bar a man so, so, so good-looking that—that she wanted to have him at home. It would be, like—like having a big emerald-emerald-emerald in an open jewel box. Untouchable. From the ring she saw he was married. How to marry-marry-marry a being who was only to-to-to be seen, she stammered in her thoughts. She'd die of embarrassment to eat in front of him because he was good looking beyond any person's possible balance.

Since didn't she want to rest her back for a day? She knew that if she said this to her boss he wouldn't believe her ribs hurt. So she used a lie that was more convincing than truth: she said to her boss that she couldn't work the next day because having a tooth pulled was very dangerous. And the lie worked. Sometimes only a lie can save you. So, the next day, when the four tired Marias went to work, she had for the first time in her life the most precious thing of all: solitude. She had a room all to herself. She could hardly believe that all this space was hers. And not a word was heard. So she danced in an act of absolute courage, since her aunt couldn't hear her. She danced and twirled because being alone made her: f-r-e-e! She enjoyed everything, of this arduously obtained solitude, the radio as loud as it would go, the vastness of the room without the Marias. She got, as a favor, a little instant coffee from the landlady, and, as another favor, she asked her for some boiling water, drank it all licking herself and in front of the mirror so as not to miss any of herself. The encounter with herself was a good she had not yet known. I don't think I've ever been so happy in my entire life, she thought. She owed nothing to anyone and no one owed her a thing. She even allowed herself the luxury of boredom—a quite unusual boredom.

I don't entirely trust her unexpected facility for asking favors. So did she need special conditions in order to become charming? Why hadn't she always acted like this in her life? And even looking at herself in the mirror wasn't that scary: she was happy but how it ached.

—Ah month of May, never leave me again! (Explosion) was her intimate exclamation the next day, May 7, she who never exclaimed. Probably because something had finally been given to her. Given by herself, but given.

On that morning of May seventh, the unexpected ecstasy for her tiny little body. The open and glittering light of the streets went right through her

opacity. May, month of bridal veils floating in white.

The following is just an attempt to reproduce three pages I wrote and that my cook, seeing them lying around, threw away to my despair—may the dead help me bear what is almost unbearable, since the living aren't much use to me. I won't even manage to match the attempt at artificial repetition of what I originally wrote about meeting her future boyfriend. It's with humility that I'll now tell the story of the story. But if anyone asks how it went I'll say: I don't know, I lost the meeting.

May, month of butterfly brides floating in white veils. Her exclamation might have been a foreboding of what was going to happen at the end of the afternoon of that same day: in the middle of the pouring rain she met (explosion) the first thing she could call a boyfriend in her life, her heart beating as if she'd swallowed a little fluttering and captured bird. She and the boy looked at each other in the middle of the rain and recognized each other as northeasterners, creatures of the same species sniffing each other out. He had looked at her wiping his wet face with his hands. And the girl, seeing him was enough to turn him immediately into her guava preserve with cheese.

He …

He came up to her with a singsong northeastern voice that moved her, asked her:

—And I beg your pardon, missy, can I invite you for a stroll?

—Yes, she hurriedly replied confusedly before he changed his mind.

—And if you'll allow me, what's your name, little lady?

—Macabéa.

—Maca what?

—Béa, she had to finish.

—Sorry but that sounds like a disease, a skin disease.

—I think it's strange too but my mother gave it to me because of a promise to Our Lady of the Good Death if I survived, I didn't have a name till I was one, I'd rather have been called nothing instead of a name that nobody has but it seems to work—she stopped for a moment to catch her lost breath and added dispirited and with modesty—because as you see, sir, I survived … anyway …

—In the backlands of Paraíba a promise is also a great question of honor.

They didn't know how to take a walk. They walked through the heavy rain and stopped in front of a hardware store where the window display

featured piping, tin cans, large bolts and nails. And Macabéa, afraid that the silence might already mean separation, said to her new boyfriend:

—I just love bolts and nails, what about you, sir?

The second time they met a soft drizzle was falling that soaked them to the bone. Without even holding hands they walked in the rain that on Macabéa's face looked like flowing tears.

The third time they met—wouldn't you know it was raining?—the guy, irritated and losing the light varnish of politeness that his stepfather had taught him with great effort, said:

—All you ever do is rain!

—I'm sorry.

But she already loved him so much that she could no longer do without him, she was desperately in love.

Once when they met she finally asked his name.

—Olímpico de Jesus Moreira Chaves—he lied because his only last name was de Jesus, name of those who have no father. He'd been raised by a stepfather who taught him smooth ways of dealing with people in order to take advantage of them and how to pick up girls.

—I don't understand your name—she said.—Olímpico?

Macabéa feigned enormous curiosity hiding from him that she never understood anything very well and that was just how it was. But he little fighting cock that he was, bristled at the stupid question to which he didn't know the answer. He said annoyed:

—I know but I don't want to tell you!

—It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter … we don't need to know what our names mean.

She knew what desire was—though she didn't know she knew. It was like this: she was starving but not for food, it was a kind of painful taste that rose from the pit of her stomach and made her nipples quiver and her arms empty without an embrace. She got all dramatic and living hurt. That's when she grew a little nervous and Glória gave her sugared water.

Olímpico de Jesus worked in a metals factory and she didn't even notice that he didn't call himself a "worker" but a "metallurgist". Macabéa was pleased with his social position because she was also proud of being a typist, even though she earned less than minimum wage. But she and Olímpico were somebody in the world. "Metallurgist and typist" were a

classy pair. Olímpico's work had the taste you get when you smoke a cigarette you've lit on the wrong end, on the filter. His job was taking metal rods coming off the top of the machine and putting them below, on a conveyor belt. He'd never wondered why you put the bars down there. His life wasn't so bad and he even managed to save some money: he slept for free in a gatehouse at a demolition site because his friend was the watchman.

Macabéa said:

—Good manners are the best inheritance.

—Well I think the best inheritance is lots of money. But one day I'll be very rich—said he who had a demonic grandeur: his strength was bursting.

One thing he wanted to be was a bullfighter. Once he'd gone to the movies and shivered from head to toe when he saw the red cape. He didn't feel sorry for the bull. What he liked was seeing blood.

In the northeast he'd saved week after week to have a perfect tooth pulled and traded for a tooth of shimmering gold. This tooth gave him a position in life. Moreover, killing had made him a man with a capital M. Olímpico had no shame, he was what they call in the northeast an old goat. But he didn't know that he was an artist: in his off-hours he sculpted figures of saints and they were so lovely that he didn't sell them. He put in all the details and, with all due respect, sculpted everything on the Christ Child. He thought that the way things are is the way things are, and Christ had been besides a saint a man like him, though without the gold tooth.

Public affairs interested Olímpico. He loved listening to speeches. That he had his opinions, there was no doubt about that. He'd squat with a cheap cigarette in his hand and think. The way he'd squat on the ground back in Paraíba, sitting on zero, meditating. He said out loud and by himself:

—I'm very intelligent, I'll end up a congressman.

And who can deny that he was good at speeches? He had the singsong tone and the oily phrases, just right for someone who opens his mouth and speaks demanding and determining the rights of men. In the future, which I don't get into in this story, did he or didn't he end up in Congress? And forcing other people to call him doctor.

Macabéa was actually a medieval figure whereas Olímpico de Jesus thought of himself as a key player, the kind that opens any door. Macabéa simply wasn't technical, she was just her. No, I don't want to have sentimentality and so I'm going to get rid of the patheticness implicit in this

girl. But I should note that Macabéa had never received a letter in her life and the office phone only rang for the boss and Glória. Once she asked Olímpico to call her at the office. He said:

—Call to hear your crap?

When Olímpico told her he'd end up a congressman from the State of Paraíba, her jaw dropped and she thought: when we get married will that make me a congresswoman? She didn't want to, since congresswoman sounded like an ugly name. (As I said, this is not a story about thoughts. Later I'll probably go back to the unnamed feelings, even feelings about God. But Macabéa's story has to come out or I'll burst.)

The couple's rare conversations touched on flour, beef jerky, dried beef, brown sugar, molasses. Because this past belonged to both of them and they had forgotten the bitterness of childhood because childhood, once it's over, is always bittersweet and even makes you nostalgic. They could have passed for brother and sister, something which—I'm only realizing it now—rules out getting married. But I don't know if they knew that. Will they get married? I still don't know, I just know that they were somehow innocent and cast little shadow upon the ground.

No, I lied, now I see it all: he wasn't innocent in the least, even though he was a general victim of the world. He had, I just discovered, inside of him the hard seed of evil, he liked taking revenge, this was his great pleasure and what gave him his strength in life. More life than her, who didn't have a guardian angel.

Anyway whatever was going to happen, would happen. And for the time being nothing was happening, the two of them didn't know how to invent happenings. They sat on something free: a bench in the public park. And sitting there, nothing distinguished them from the rest of nothing. For the great glory of God.

He:—Anyway.

She:—Anyway what?

He:—I only said anyway!

She:—But "anyway" what?

He:—Let's change the subject since you don't understand me.

She:—Understand what?

He:—Mother of God, Macabéa, let's change the subject this second!

She:—And talk about what?

He:—For example, about you.

She:—Me?!

He:—What's the matter? Aren't you someone? People talk about people.

She:—Sorry but I don't think I'm really people.

He:—But everyone's people, my God!

She:—I just never got used to it.

He:—Never got used to what?

She:—Ah, I can't explain.

He:—And so?

She:—So what?

He:—Look, I'm leaving because you're impossible!

She:—But all I know how to do is be impossible. What can I do to become possible?

He:—Stop talking because all you say is crap! Say whatever you want.

She:—I think I don't know what to say.

He:—You don't know what?

She:—Huh?

He:—Look, I'm sighing in agony. Let's not talk about anything, okay?

She:—Yes, fine, whatever you like.

He:—Yeah, there's no solution for you. As for me, people called my name so many times that I became myself. In the backlands of Paraíba everybody knows who Olímpico is. And one day the whole world will know about me.

—Really?

—That's what I'm telling you! You don't believe me?

—Of course I do, I believe you, I believe you, I believe you, I don't want to offend you.

When she was a girl she'd seen a house painted pink and white with a yard where there was a well and everything. It was good to look inside. So her ideal became this: to have a well just for her. But she didn't know how and so she asked Olímpico:

—Do you know if you can buy a hole?

—Look, haven't you noticed, none of your questions have answers?

She sat there leaning her head on her shoulder the way a dove gets sad.

When he talked about getting rich, once she said to him:

—Couldn't it just be a vision?

—Go to hell, all you do is mistrust me. The only reason I don't use bad words is because you're a virgin.

—Careful with your worries, they say it hurts your stomach.

—What worries, since I know for sure I'm going to conquer. Well, and do you have worries?

—No, not at all. I think I don't need to conquer in life.

It was the only time she spoke of herself to Olímpico de Jesus. She was used to forgetting about herself. She never broke her habits, she was afraid of inventing.

—Did you know that on Clock Radio they said that a man wrote a book called "Alice in Wonderland" and that he was also a mathematician? They also talked about "elgebra". What does "elgebra" mean?

—Knowing that stuff is for queers, for men who become women. Sorry I said queer because that's a bad word for a decent girl.

—On that station they say this thing about "culture" and difficult words, for example: what does "electronic" mean?

Silence.

—I know but I don't want to tell you.

—I just love hearing the drops of the minutes of time like this: tic-tac-tic-tac-tic-tac. Clock Radio says that it gives the correct time, culture and ads. What does culture mean?

—Culture is culture, he continued sulking. You like putting my back against the wall.

—Because there are so many things I don't understand. What does "per capita income" mean?

—Oh, that's easy, it's something for doctors.

—What does Count of Bonfim Street mean? What's a count? Is that a prince?

—A count is a count, for God's sake. I don't need the correct time because I've got a watch.

He didn't tell her that he'd stolen it in the factory washroom: another worker had left it by the sink while he was washing his hands. Nobody found out, he was a true technician of theft: he didn't wear the wristwatch to work.

—You know what else I learned? They said you should be glad to be alive. So I am. I also heard a pretty song, I even cried.

—A samba?

—I think so. And sung by a man named Caruso who they said already died. His voice was so gentle it even hurt to hear it. The song was called

“Una furtiva lacrima”. I don’t know why they didn’t say *lágrima*.

“Una furtiva lacrima” had been the only really beautiful thing in her life. Wiping away her own tears she tried to sing what she heard. But her voice was as crude and out of tune as she was. When she heard it she started to cry. It was the first time she’d ever cried, she didn’t know she had so much water in her eyes. She cried, blew her nose no longer knowing what she was crying about. She wasn’t crying because of the life she led: because, never having led any other, she’d accepted that with her that was just the way things were. But I also think she was crying because, through the music, she might have guessed there were other ways of feeling, there were more delicate existences and even a certain luxury of soul. She knew that there were a lot of things she didn’t know how to understand. Did “aristocracy” mean an answered prayer? Probably. If that’s the way things are, that’s how they should be. The plunge into the vastness of the musical world that didn’t need to be understood. Her heart shot. And with Olímpico she suddenly became courageous and plunging into the unknown parts of herself said:

—I even think I can sing that song. La-la-la-la-la.

—You sound like a mute trying to sing. You’ve got a voice like a split cane.

—It must be because it’s the first time I’ve ever sung.

She thought that lacrima instead of lágrima was the radio man’s mistake. It had never occurred to her that there was any other language and she thought that in Brazil people spoke Brazilian. Besides the cargo ships on Sundays, this song was all she had. The last substratum of the song was her only vibration.

The relationship remained strained. He said:

—After my sainted mother died, there was nothing to keep me in Paraíba.

—What did she die of?

—Of nothing. Her health gave out.

He talked big but she paid attention to things that were as insignificant as she was. That’s why she noticed a rusted, twisted, creaking, peeling gate that led to a row of identical workers houses. She’d seen it from the bus. The alleyway besides having the number 106 had a plaque where the name was written. It was called “Sunrise”. A pretty name that also augured good things.

She'd thought Olímpico knew a lot about things. He said things she'd never heard. Once he said:

—Your face is more important than your body because your face shows what you're thinking. You have the face of somebody who ate something and didn't like it, I don't like sad faces, try to change—and he said a difficult word—try to change your "expression".

She said all upset:

—It's the only face I've got. But I'm only sad on my face because inside I'm actually happy. It's so good to be alive, don't you think?

—Sure! But living well is only for the privileged. I'm one of them and I may look small and skinny but I'm strong and I could lift you off the ground with a single arm. Wanna see?

—No, no, people are watching and they'll curse us!

—Nobody looks at a girl like you.

And they walked to the corner. Macabéa was very happy. He really lifted her into the air, over his head. She said euphoric:

—This must be what it's like to fly in an airplane.

Right. But suddenly he couldn't bear the weight on a single arm and she fell face down in the mud, her nose bleeding. But she was polite and immediately said:

—Don't worry, it was just a little fall.

Since she didn't have a handkerchief to clean off the mud and blood, she wiped her face with her skirt, saying:

—Don't look at me while I'm cleaning myself up, please, because it's not allowed to lift your skirt.

But he'd suddenly started sulking and didn't say another word. He didn't turn up for several days: his manliness had been wounded.

He ended up coming back to her. For different reasons they went into a butcher's shop. For her the smell of raw meat was a perfume that levitated her as if she'd eaten. As for him, what he wanted to see was the butcher and his sharp knife. He envied the butcher and wanted to be one himself. Sticking a knife into meat turned him on. Both left the butcher's satisfied. Though she wondered: what would that meat taste like? And he wondered: how do you get to be a butcher? What was the secret? (Glória's father worked in a gorgeous butcher's.) She said:

—I'll miss myself so bad when I die.

—Bullshit, once you're dead you're dead.

—That's not what my aunt taught me.

—To hell with your aunt.

—You know what I want more than anything else in the world? To be a movie star. I only go to the movies on payday. I prefer a little theater, it's cheaper. I love movie stars. Did you know that Marylin was all pink?

—And you're all dirt. You don't have the face or the body to be a movie star.

—You don't think so?

—It's all over your face.

—I don't like to see blood at the movies. Look, I really can't see it because it makes me want to throw up.

—Throw up or cry?

—Up till now thank God I've never thrown up.

—Yeah, there's no milk in this cow.

Thinking was so hard, she didn't know how you were supposed to think. But Olímpico not only thought, he even used fancy words. She'd never forget that when they first met he'd called her "missy", he'd made her a somebody. Since she was a somebody, she'd even bought a pink lipstick. Her dialogue was always hollow. She was remotely aware that she'd never said a true word. And "love" she didn't call love, she called it I-don't-know-what.

—Look, Macabéa …

—Look at what?

—No, my God, not "look" to see something, "look" when you want someone to listen! Are you listening to me?

—Every word, every word!

—Every word of what, my God, if I still haven't said anything! Anyway look, I'm going to treat you to a coffee at the bar. You want one?

—Can it be with milk?

—It's the same price but if it's extra you pay the difference. Macabéa didn't cost Olímpico a cent. Only this time when he bought her a coffee with milk which she stuffed with so much sugar that she almost threw up but managed to hold it down and not disgrace herself. She put in a lot of sugar to take advantage of the opportunity.

And once they went to the zoo, she paying her own way. She was shocked to see the animals. She was afraid and didn't understand them: why did they live? When she saw the compact, thick, black and chubby mass of

the rhinoceros which was moving in slow motion she was so afraid she wet her pants. The rhinoceros looked to her like an error of God. Please forgive me, okay? But she hadn't thought of any God, it was just a way of. By the grace of some deity, Olímpico didn't notice and she said to him:

—I'm wet because I sat on the wet bench.

And he didn't notice a thing. She automatically prayed in thanks. It wasn't thanks to God, she was just repeating what she learned in childhood.

—The giraffe is so elegant isn't it?

—Bullshit, animals aren't elegant.

She envied the giraffe that hovered so far in the air. Having seen that her comments on animals displeased Olímpico she sought another subject:

—On Clock Radio they used a word I thought was a little weird: mimetism.

Olímpico looked at her warily.

—Is that the kind of thing a virgin girl ought to be saying? And what's the use of knowing too much? The Mangue is full of girls who asked too many questions.

—Is the Mangue a neighborhood?

—It's a bad place, just for men. You won't understand but I'll tell you something: you can still get women cheap. You didn't cost me much, just a coffee. I won't spend another cent on you, okay?

She thought: I don't deserve for him to buy me anything because I've peed in my pants.

After the rain in the zoo, Olímpico changed: he lost his temper. And without realizing that he himself was a man of few words like a man ought to be, he said to her:

—But for goodness sake! You never open your trap and don't have anything to say!

Then devastated she said to him:

—Look, the Emperor Charlemagne was called Carolus in his own land! And did you know that flies travel so fast that if they flew in a straight line they could go around the whole world in 28 days?

—That's a lie!

—No it's not, I swear by my pure soul I learned that on Clock Radio!

—Well I don't believe you.

—May I drop dead this minute if I'm telling a lie. May my father and mother go to hell if I'm tricking you.

—You just might drop dead. Listen here: are you just pretending to be an idiot or are you actually an idiot?

—I'm not sure what I am, I think I'm a little … what? … I mean I'm not quite sure who I am.

—But you know your name is Macabéa, at least?

—That's true. But I don't know what's inside my name. I only know that I never was important …

—Well mark my words that my name will be in all the papers and everybody will know it.

She said to Olímpico:

—Do you know that on my street there's a rooster that sings?

—Why do you lie so much?

—I swear, may my mother drop dead if it's not true!

—But didn't your mother already die?

—Oh, that's right … how do you like that …

(But what about me? What about me telling this story that never happened to me or anyone I know? I'm astonished to know the truth so well. Could it be that my painful task is to guess in the flesh the truth that nobody wants to see? If I know almost everything about Macabéa it's because I once caught the eye of a jaundiced northeastern girl. That glance gave me every inch of her. As for the Paraíban, I must have made a mental photograph of his face—and when you pay attention spontaneously and virgin of impressions, when you pay attention the face says almost everything.)

And now I'm erasing myself again and returning to these two people who inevitably were somewhat abstract beings.

But I still haven't explained Olímpico very well. He came from the backlands of Paraíba and had a toughness that came from the passion for his wild land cracked by drought. He'd brought with him, bought in a market in Paraíba, a tin of perfumed Vaseline and a comb, as sole and exclusive possessions. He greased his black hair till it was soaked. He never suspected that Rio girls were disgusted by that fatty treacle. He'd been born more charred and hard than a dry tree branch or a rock in the sun. He was more susceptible to survive than Macabéa because it wasn't by chance that he had killed a man, a rival of his, in the back of beyond, the long jackknife entering softly softly the backwoodsman's liver. He had kept this crime an absolute secret, which gave him the power a secret gives. Olímpico was

tough as a prizefighter. But he broke down during funerals: sometimes he went three times a week to the funerals of strangers, whose obituaries appeared in the papers and especially in “O Dia”: and his eyes filled with tears. It was a weakness, but who doesn’t have one. A week without a funeral was an empty week for this man who might have been crazy but knew very well what he wanted. So actually he wasn’t crazy at all. Macabéa, unlike Olímpico, was a cross between “what” and “what”. In fact she seemed to have been born of some vague idea of her starving parents. Olímpico at least stole whenever he could and even from the night watchman at the construction site where he slept. Having killed and stealing made him more than a random occurrence, they gave him some class, they made him a man whose honor had been defended. He had an additional advantage over Macabéa because he had great talent for quickly drawing perfect ridiculous caricatures of the pictures of powerful people in the papers. It was his revenge. The only nice thing he did for Macabéa was tell her he’d find her a job in the metal factory when she got fired. For her the promise was a scandal of joy (explosion) because in the metal factory she’d find her only current connection with the world: Olímpico himself. But Macabéa in general didn’t worry about her own future: having a future was a luxury. She’d heard on Clock Radio that there were seven billion people in the world. She felt lost. But with the tendency she had to be happy she immediately consoled herself: there were seven billion people to help her.

Macabéa loved horror films and musicals. She especially liked when the women were hanged or shot through the heart. She didn’t know that she herself was a suicide although it had never crossed her mind to kill herself. Because life was more tasteless to her than old bread with no butter. Whereas Olímpico was a certified and vital demon and from him children would be born, he had the precious semen. And as was already said or not said Macabéa had ovaries shriveled as a cooked mushroom. Ah if only I could grab Macabéa, give her a good bath, a plate of hot soup, a kiss on the forehead as I tucked her into bed. And cause her to wake up and find simply the great luxury of living.

Olímpico in fact showed no satisfaction in dating Macabéa—that’s what I’m discovering now. Olímpico might have seen that Macabéa didn’t have the strength of breeding, she was a subproduct. But when he saw Glória, Macabéa’s coworker, he immediately realized she had class.

Glória had a good Portuguese wine in her blood and also a way of swinging her hips when she walked thanks to some hidden African blood. Though she was white, she had the strength of mixed race. She bleached egg-yellow the frizzy hair whose roots were always black. But even bleached she was still a blonde, which made her a step up for Olímpico. Besides having a great advantage a northeasterner couldn't overstate. Because Glória has said to him, when she'd been introduced to him by Macabéa: "I was born and bred in Rio!" Olímpico didn't know what "born and bred" meant since that was an expression that dated to Glória's father's youth. The fact that she was a carioca made her belong to the longed-for clan from the South. Seeing her, he immediately guessed that, though ugly, Glória was well fed. And that made her quality goods.

In the meantime his relationship with Macabéa had fallen into a tepid routine, not that it ever could have been described as hot. He often didn't show up at the bus stop. But at least he was still a boyfriend. And all Macabéa thought about was the day he'd want to get engaged. And married.

Later, from asking around, he learned that Glória had a father, mother and a hot meal at the same hour every day. That made her first-quality goods. Olímpico was ecstatic when he learned that her father worked in a butcher's shop.

From her hips you could tell Glória was made for childbearing. Whereas Macabéa seemed to have in herself her own end.

I forgot to say that it was really alarming that from Macabéa's almost parched body so vast was her almost unlimited breath of life and as rich as of that of a pregnant maiden, impregnated by herself, by parthenogenesis; she had schizoid dreams in which giant antediluvian animals appeared as if she'd lived in the most remote epics of this bloody earth.

It was then (explosion) that suddenly the relationship between Olímpico and Macabéa came to an end. A perhaps odd relationship but at least a distant relative of some pale love. He told her he'd met another girl and it was Glória. (Explosion) Macabéa saw perfectly well what happened between Olímpico and Glória: their eyes had kissed.

Looking at Macabéa's slightly too inexpressive face, he almost wanted to say something nice to take away the sting of saying goodbye forever. And as he was leaving he said:

—You, Macabéa, are like a hair in the soup. Nobody feels like eating it. Sorry to hurt your feelings, but I'm being honest. Did I hurt your feelings?

—No, no, no! Oh please I want to go! Please just say goodbye!

It's better for me not to speak of happiness or unhappiness—it provokes that swooning longing and lilac, that violet perfume, the chilly waters of the gentle tide in foam upon the sand. I don't want to provoke because it hurts.

Macabéa, I forgot to say, had an unhappiness: she was sensual. How could it be that in that cavity-ridden body so much lasciviousness could fit, without her even knowing she had it? Mystery. She had, at the beginning of the relationship, asked Olímpico for a 3x4 snapshot in which he was laughing to show off his gold tooth and she got so excited that she prayed three Our Fathers and two Hail Marys to calm down.

When Olímpico dumped her, her reaction (explosion) came suddenly unexpected: with no warning she started laughing. She was laughing because she forgot how to cry. Surprised, Olímpico, not understanding, chuckled a few times.

The two stood there laughing. Then he had an intuition which ended up being an act of kindness: he asked if she was laughing out of nervousness. She stopped laughing and said very, very tired:

—I don't really know …

Macabéa understood one thing: Glória was a fanfare of existence. And it must have been all because Glória was fat. Fat had always been Macabéa's secret ideal, since in Maceió she'd heard a guy say to a fat girl walking down the street: "your flesh is fresh!" From then on she'd aspired to fleshiness and that was when she made the only request of her life. She asked her aunt to buy her cod-liver oil. (Even then she had a thing for ads.) Her aunt asked her: you think you're some rich man's daughter wanting luxuries?

After Olímpico dumped her, since she wasn't a sad person, she tried to go on as if she hadn't lost anything. (She didn't despair, etc. etc.) And anyway what could she do? Since she was chronic. And even sadness was also something for rich people, for people who could afford it, for people who didn't have anything better to do. Sadness was a luxury.

I forgot to say the day after he dumped her she got an idea. Since nobody ever gave her a party, much less got engaged to her, she'd give a party for herself. The party consisted in buying without necessity a new lipstick: not pink like the one she had, but bright red. In the office bathroom she painted her lips and even beyond so her thin lips would get that weird thing like Marylin Monroe. Once she was done, she stood looking in the mirror at the

figure that in turn looked back at her astonished. Because instead of lipstick it looked like thick blood had spurted from her lips from a tooth-breaking flesh-busting sock in the mouth (small explosion). When she went back to her desk Glória laughed at her:

—Did you lose your mind, girl? Painting your face like you're possessed? You look like the kind of girl who goes with soldiers.

—I'm a virgin! I don't go with soldiers or sailors.

—Sorry for asking: does being ugly hurt?

—I never thought about it, I think it hurts a little. But I should ask you if you hurt because you're ugly.

—I'm not ugly!!!—Glória howled.

After that peace was restored and Macabéa continued to enjoy thinking about nothing. Empty, empty. As I said before, she didn't have a guardian angel. But she got on the best she could. Beyond that, she was almost impersonal. Glória asked her:

—Why do you ask me for so much aspirin? I'm not complaining, even though it costs money.

—It's so I won't hurt.

—What? Huh? You're hurting?

—I hurt all the time.

—Where?

—Inside, I can't explain.

Besides she increasingly couldn't explain herself. She transformed herself into organic simplicity. And she'd figured out how to find in simple and honest things the grace of a sin. She liked to feel time passing. Although she didn't have a watch, or perhaps for that very reason, she savored the greatness of time. She was supersonic in life. Nobody noticed that with her existence she was breaking the sound barrier. For other people she didn't exist. Her only advantage over others was knowing how to swallow pills without any water, dry. Glória, who gave her aspirin, admired this a lot, which gave Macabéa a nice feeling of warmth in her heart. Glória warned her:

—One day the pill will stick in your throat and you'll be running around like a chicken with a half-cut neck.

One day she had an ecstasy. It was in front of a tree that was so big she could never wrap her arms around its trunk. But despite the ecstasy she did not abide with God. She prayed indifferently. Yes. But the mysterious God

of other people gave her a state of grace. Happy, happy, happy. Her soul almost flying. And she'd also seen a flying saucer. She'd tried to tell Glória but couldn't, she didn't know how to talk, and to tell her what? The air? You can't tell everything because the everything is a hollow nothing.

Sometimes grace grabbed her in the middle of the office. So she'd go to the bathroom to be alone. Standing and smiling until it passed (it strikes me that this God was extremely merciful to her: He gave her what He took away). Standing thinking of nothing, eyes glazed over.

Not even Glória was a friend: just a coworker. Chubby, white, dull Glória. She smelled weird. Because she didn't wash much, that was for sure. She bleached the hair on her hairy legs and on the armpits she didn't shave. Olímpico: is she blonde down there too?

Toward Macabéa, Glória had a vague feeling of maternity. Whenever Macabéa looked too shriveled, she said:

—And that look is because?

Macabéa, who never got annoyed with anyone, cringed at Glória's habit of leaving sentences unfinished. Glória used a strong sandalwood cologne and Macabéa, who had a delicate stomach, almost threw up when she smelled it. She said nothing because Glória was her only connection with the world. That world had been composed of her aunt, Glória, Mr. Raimundo and Olímpico—and very distantly the girls she shared a room with. To make up for it she identified with the picture of the young Greta Garbo. To my surprise, since I didn't imagine Macabéa could feel what a face like that was saying. Greta Garbo, she thought without explaining herself, that woman must be the most important woman in the world. But what she really wanted to be wasn't the haughty Greta Garbo whose tragic sensuality was on a solitary pedestal. What she wanted, as I said, was to look like Marylin. One day, in a rare confessional moment, she told Glória who she wanted to be. And Glória burst out laughing:

—Her, Maca? Get real!

Glória was all happy about herself: she thought she was really something. She knew she had the swinging groove of the mulata, a beauty spot painted next to her mouth, to make herself look tastier, and a downy upper lip that she bleached. Her mouth was blonde. It looked like a moustache. She was a cunning vixen but had a good heart. She felt bad for Macabéa but let her deal with it, who forced her to be such a moron? And Glória thought: I've got nothing to do with her.

No one can enter another's heart. Macabéa even talked with Glória—but was never entirely open with her.

Glória had a happy little butt and smoked menthols to keep her breath fresh for her interminable kisses with Olímpico. She was all puffed up with herself: she had everything her small ambitions required. And there was in her a defiance that could be summed up as: "nobody bosses me around". But then one day she started to stare and stare and stare at Macabéa. Suddenly she couldn't stand it and with a slightly Portuguese accent said:

—Oh woman, don't you have a face?

—I do too. It's just that my nose is flat, I'm from Alagoas.

—Tell me something: do you think about your future?

The question was left hanging because Macabéa didn't know how to answer.

Very well. Let's get back to Olímpico.

He, to impress Glória and impose on her right away, bought red hot peppers at the northeastern market and to show his new girlfriend how tough he was bit right into the fruit of the devil. He didn't even drink any water to douse the fire in his entrails. The nearly unbearable pain nevertheless toughened him, not to mention that Glória terrified started to obey him. He thought: didn't I say I was a conqueror? And he attacked Glória with the strength of a drone, she'd give him the honey of bees and thick steaks. He didn't regret for a second dumping Macabéa because his destiny was to rise in order one day to enter the world of others. He hungered to be others. In Glória's world for example, he'd fill his pockets, the fragile little macho. He'd finally stop being what he'd always been and what he'd hidden even from himself ashamed of such weakness: because since he was a boy he'd been no more than a solitary heart beating with difficulty in space. The man from the backlands is above all a patient. I forgive him.

Glória, wanting to make up for stealing the other girl's boyfriend, invited her for a snack one afternoon, Sunday, at her house. To treat the wound she herself had inflicted? (Ah what a boring story, I can hardly stand writing it.)

And then (small explosion) Macabéa stared wide. Because amidst the dirty disorder of the lowest reaches of the middle class there was nonetheless the dull comfort of people who spend all their money on food, in that neighborhood people ate a lot. Glória lived on General so-and-so street, very pleased to live on a street named after a military leader, she felt

safer. In her house there was even a telephone. It might have been one of the few times that Macabéa saw that for her there was no place in the world and exactly because Glória gave her so much. That is, a cup filled to the brim with thick real chocolate mixed with milk and many kinds of sugared buns, not to mention a small cake. Macabéa, while Glória was out of the room—secretly robbed a cookie. Then she asked for forgiveness of the abstract Being who gives and takes. She felt forgiven. The Being forgave her everything.

The next day, Monday, maybe because of the liver affected by the chocolate or because she was nervous about drinking rich people's stuff, she got sick. She didn't vomit afraid to waste the luxury of the chocolate. Days later, on payday, she found the nerve for the first time in her life (explosion) to go to the cheap doctor Glória recommended. He examined her, examined her, and examined her again.

—Are you on a diet, my girl?

Macabéa didn't know what to answer.

—What do you eat?

—Hot dogs.

—Just?

—Sometimes I have a bologna sandwich.

—What do you drink? Milk?

—Only coffee and soft drinks.

—What kind of soft drinks?—he asked not knowing what to say. He randomly inquired:

—Do you ever have fits of vomiting?

—Oh, never!—she exclaimed very shocked, for she wasn't fool enough to waste food, as I said.

The doctor took a good look at her and was well aware she wasn't on a diet. But it was more comfortable to keep insisting that she shouldn't diet to lose weight. He knew that was just the way it was and that he was a doctor to the poor. That's what he said while prescribing a tonic that she afterwards didn't even bother to buy, she thought that going to the doctor was a cure in itself. He added irritated without guessing the reason for his sudden irritation and disgust:

—This whole thing about the hot dog diet is pure neurosis and what you need is to see a psychoanalyst!

She didn’t understand a word but thought the doctor expected her to smile. So she smiled.

The very fat and sweaty doctor had a nervous tic that made him purse his lips every once in a while. The result was that he looked like a pouting baby about to cry.

This doctor had no point whatsoever. Medicine was just to make money and never for love of his profession or of the sick. He was careless and thought poverty was ugly. He worked for the poor while hating having to deal with them. For him they were the rejects of a very high society to which he too didn’t be-long. He knew he was out-of-date with medicine and clinical novelties but it was good enough for poor people. His dream was to have money to do exactly what he wanted: nothing.

When he’d said he was going to examine her she said:

—I heard you have to take your clothes off at the doctor’s but I’m not taking off a thing.

He’d run her through the x-ray and said:

—You’re in the early stages of pulmonary tuberculosis.

Macabéa didn’t know if this was good or bad. Anyway, since she was a very polite person, she said:

—Thank you very much, okay?

The doctor simply refused to take pity. And added: when you don’t know what to eat make a nice Italian spaghetti.

And he added with the minimum of goodness he allowed himself since he also considered he’d been dealt with unkindly:

—It doesn’t cost that much …

—The name of the food you said, sir, I’ve never heard of it. Is it good?

—Of course it is! Just look at this paunch! That’s from big helpings of pasta and lots of beer. Forget the beer, it’s better not to drink alcohol. She repeated wearily:

—Alcohol?

—You know what? Buzz off!

Yes, I’m in love with Macabéa, my dear Maca, in love with her ugliness and total anonymity since she belongs to no one. In love with her weak lungs, the scraggly girl. How I’d like her to open her mouth and say:

—I am alone in the world and I don’t believe in anyone, everyone lies, sometimes even when making love, I don’t think one being speaks to another, the truth only comes to me when I’m alone.

Maca, however, never said sentences, first of all because she was a person of few words. And it so happens that she had no consciousness of herself and didn't complain at all, she even thought she was happy. She wasn't an idiot but she had the pure happiness of idiots. And she also didn't pay attention to herself: she didn't know. (I see that I've tried to give a situation of my own to Maca: I need a few hours of solitude everyday or "me muero".)

As for me, I'm only truthful when I'm alone. When I was a little boy I thought that from one minute to the next I could fall off the face of the earth. Why don't clouds fall, since everything else does? Because gravity is less than the strength of the air that keeps them up there. Clever, right? Yes, but one day they fall as rain. That is my revenge.

She didn't tell Glória anything, because on the whole she lied: she was ashamed of the truth. The lie was so much more decent. She thought that good manners meant knowing how to lie. She also lied to herself in volatile daydreams in her envy of her coworker. Glória, for instance, was inventive: Macabéa saw her say goodbye to Olímpico by kissing the tips of her fingers and tossing the kiss into the air as if releasing a bird, which would never have occurred to Macabéa.

(This story is only unworked facts of raw materials that hit me directly before I can think. I know many things I can't say. Besides think what?)

Glória, perhaps remorseful, said to her:

—Olímpico is mine but you'll definitely find another boyfriend. I say he's mine because that's what my fortune-teller told me and I don't want to disobey because she's psychic and never makes mistakes. Why don't you pay for a session and ask her to read your cards?

—Is it very expensive?

I am absolutely tired of literature; only muteness keeps me company. If I still write it's because I have nothing better to do in the world while I wait for death. The search for the word in the dark. My small success invades me and exposes me to glances on the street. I want to stagger through the mud, my need for abjection I can hardly control, the need for the orgy and the worst absolute delight. Sin attracts me, prohibited things fascinate me. I want to be a pig and a hen and then kill them and drink their blood. I think

of Macabéa's sex, mute but unexpectedly covered with thick and abundant black hairs—her sex was the only vehement sign of her existence.

She asked for nothing but her sex made its demands, like a sunflower born in a tomb. As for me, I'm tired. Maybe of the company of Macabéa, Glória, Olímpico. The doctor nauseated me with his beer. I have to interrupt this story for about three days.

For the last three days, alone, without characters, I depersonalize myself and take myself off as if taking off clothes. I depersonalize myself so much that I fall asleep.

And now I emerge and miss Macabéa. Let's continue:

—Is it very expensive?

—I'll loan you the money. Madame Carlota also breaks any spells someone might have cast on us. She broke mine on the stroke of midnight on a Friday the thirteenth in August, way past São Miguel, where they do macumba. They bled a black pig on top of me, seven white hens and tore off my clothes that were soaked with blood. Do you have the nerve?

—I don't know if I can see blood.

Maybe because blood is everyone's secret, the vivifying tragedy. But Macabéa only knew she couldn't see blood, I thought up the rest of it. I'm becoming terribly interested in facts: facts are hard rocks. You can't escape. Facts are words spoken by the world.

So.

Faced with the sudden help, Macabéa, who never remembered to ask, asked her boss for the day off claiming a tooth-ache and accepted the loan that she didn't even know how to repay. That daring decision gave her the unexpected encouragement to do something even more daring (explosion): since the money was a loan, she crookedly reasoned that it wasn't hers and so she could spend it. So for the first time in her life she took a taxi and went to Olaria. I suspect that desperation is what made her so daring, even though she didn't know she was desperate, she was on her last legs, face-down in the dirt.

It wasn't hard to find Madame Carlota's address and that seemed like a good sign. The ground-floor apartment was on the corner of an alleyway and between the paving stones grass was growing—she'd noticed it because she always noticed small and insignificant things. She vaguely thought

while ringing the doorbell: grass is so easy and simple. She had unprompted and stray thoughts because even though she was at random she possessed much inner freedom.

Madame Carlota herself opened the door, looked at her amiably and said:

—My spirit guide had already told me you were coming to see me, my darling. What's your name again? Oh, really? Very pretty. Come in, my pet. I'm with a client in the back room, you wait here. Would you like a coffee, my little dear?

Macabéa was slightly taken aback because she had no experience with so much kindness. And she drank, with care for her own fragile life, the cold and almost sugarless coffee. Meanwhile she looked with admiration and respect at the room where she was waiting. Everything there was luxury. Yellow plastic material on the chairs and sofas. And even plastic flowers. Plastic was the greatest. She was dazzled.

At last from the back of the house a girl came out with very red eyes and Madame Carlota told Macabéa to come in. (Dealing with facts is such a bore, daily matters wipe me out, and I don't feel like writing this story which is just me blowing off steam. I see that I'm writing above and beyond me. I'm not responsible for what I'm now writing.)

Let's continue, then, though with effort: Madame Carlota was very fat, she painted her little flabby mouth a bright red and dabbed her greasy cheeks with shiny rouge. She looked like a big half-broken china doll. (I see that there's no way to deepen this story. Description tires me.)

—Don't be afraid of me, you funny cute little thing. Because whoever's with me, is with Jesus at the same time.

And she pointed out the colored picture where exposed in red and gold was the heart of Christ.

—I'm a fan of Jesus. I'm crazy about Him. He always helped me. Look, when I was younger I had what it takes to make living easy. And it really was easy, thank God. Later, when I wasn't worth as much on the market, Jesus waited no time in hooking me up with a colleague and we opened a house of our own. So I made money and could buy this little ground-floor apartment. I got rid of the brothel because it was hard to keep an eye on all those girls who just wanted to rob me. Are you interested in what I'm saying?

—Very.

—As you should be because I don’t lie. Be a fan of Jesus too because the Savior really does save. Look, the police don’t allow fortune-telling, they say I’m exploiting other people, but, as I told you, not even the police can outclass Jesus. Did you see that He even found me money for all this fancy furniture?

—Yes ma’am.

—Ah, so you agree, right? From what I can see, you’re intelligent, luckily, because intelligence saved me.

Madame Carlota while she was talking took from an open box one chocolate bonbon after another and stuffed them into her small mouth. She didn’t offer a single one to Macabéa. She, who, as I said, tended to notice the small things, saw that inside every bitten bonbon was a thick liquid. She didn’t covet the bonbon because she’d learned that things belong to other people.

—I was poor, I hardly had anything to eat, I didn’t have nice clothes. So I ended up working. And I liked it because I’m a very sweet person, I was sweet to all the men. Besides, it was fun in the zone because the girls all hung out together. We had each other’s backs and only every once in a while did I get into a fight with any of them. But that was good, too, because I was really strong and liked to throw punches, pull hair and bite. Speaking of biting, you can’t imagine how gorgeous my teeth were, all white and sparkling. But they got ruined and now I have false teeth. You think people can tell they’re false?

—No ma’am.

—Look, I was very clean and didn’t get bad diseases. I just got syphilis once but penicillin cured me. I was more understanding than the others because I’ve got a good heart and after all was only giving what was mine to give. I had a man I really adored and I supported him because he was very refined and didn’t want to waste himself by working. He was my luxury and I even used to let him beat me up. When he gave me a thrashing I could tell he liked me, I liked a good beating. With him it was love, with the others it was just work. After he ran off, I got over him by sleeping with women. Women’s loving really is good. I’d even recommend it to you because you’re far too delicate to stand the brutality of men and if you can land yourself a woman you’ll see how great it is, love between women is so much finer. Are you lucky enough to have a woman?

—No ma’am.

—That's also because you don't do anything about your appearance. You do yourself in if you don't do yourself up. Oh how I miss the district! I knew the Mangue at its best which was frequented by true gentleman. Besides the going rate, I earned lots of tips. I heard the Mangue is done for, that there are only half a dozen houses left. In my day there were something like two hundred. I'd stand in the doorway wearing just panties and a bra made of transparent lace. Later, when I was getting real fat and losing my teeth, I started pimping. Do you know what pimping is? I use that word because I was never afraid of words. Some people get scared by the name of things. Are you afraid of words, dearie?

—Yes, ma'am.

—Then I'll be careful not to say any bad words, don't you worry. I heard the Mangue stinks to high heaven. In my day we burned incense to make the house smell nice. It even smelled like a church. And everything was very respectful and very religious. When I was working I was already saving a little money, giving the boss her percentage, of course. Sometimes there were shootouts, but it never had anything to do with me. My little flower, am I boring you with my story? Oh, no? You have the patience to wait for the reading?

—Yes, ma'am.

So Madame Carlota told her that in the Mangue, in her little cubicle, she'd put lovely decorations on the walls.

—Did you know, my love, a man's smell is good for you? Healthy. Have you ever smelled a man?

—No ma'am.

Finally, after licking her fingers, Madame Carlota told her to split the deck with her left hand, got it, you sweet little thing?

Macabéa divided the pack with a trembling hand: for the first time she was going to have a destiny. Madame Carlota (explosion) was a high point in her existence. It was the vortex of her life and it had been funneled in order to discharge into that great lady whose shiny rouge gave her skin the smoothness of plastic. Madame Carlota suddenly stared:

—But, little Macabéa dear, what a horrible life! May my friend Jesus take pity on you, my child! How awful!

Macabéa blanched: it had never occurred to her that her life was that bad.

Madame got everything right about Macabéa's past, even saying that she'd hardly known her father and mother and was raised by a relative like

a wicked stepmother. Macabéa was shocked by the revelation: up till now she'd always thought that what her aunt had done was educate her to make her a nicer girl. Madame added:

—As for the present, dearie, that's horrible too. You're going to lose your job and you've already lost your boyfriend, poor little thing. If you can't pay me, don't worry, I'm a lady of means.

Macabéa, little accustomed to getting anything for free, refused the offer but with a heart full of gratitude.

And then (explosion) it suddenly happened: Madame Carlota's face lit up all illuminated:

—Macabéa! I've got great news! Listen carefully, my flower, because what I'm about to tell you is very important. It's something very serious and very happy: your life is going to change completely! And even more: it will change the minute you step out of this house! You'll feel completely different. You can be sure, my little flower, that even your boyfriend will come back and ask you to marry him, he takes it all back! And your boss will tell you that he's thought about it and isn't going to fire you!

Macabéa had never had the courage to hope.

But she now heard Madame Carlota as if hearing a celestial trumpet—while her heart beat furiously. Madame was right: Jesus was finally taking some interest in her. Macabéa's eyes were opened wide as if by a sudden voracity for the future (explosion). And I too am finally beginning to hope.

—And there's more! You're about to come into a lot of money brought in the night by a foreign man. Do you know any foreigners?

—No ma'am—said Macabéa already losing heart.

—Well you will. He's blond with blue or green or brown or black eyes. And if you weren't in love with your ex-boyfriend, this foreigner would fall in love with you. No! No! No! Now I'm seeing something else (explosion) and though I can't see it very clearly I'm also hearing the voice of my spirit guide: this foreigner is apparently named Hans, and he's the one who's going to marry you! He's got lots of money, all foreigners are rich. If I'm not mistaken, and I'm never mistaken, he's going to give you lots of love and you, my poor little orphan, you'll wear satin and velvet and even get a fur coat!

Macabéa began (explosion) to quiver because of the painful side there is in excessive happiness. All she could think to say was:

—But you don't need a fur coat in the heat of Rio …

—Then you'll have it just to dress up. It's been a long time since I had such good cards. And I'm always sincere: for example, I just frankly told that girl right before you that she's going to get run over, she even cried a lot, did you see her red eyes? And now I'm going to give you a charm that you should wear right under your bra where you hardly have breasts, poor thing, right against you skin. You don't have a bust, but you'll start to fill out and get a body. Until you put on a little weight, stuff some cotton into your bra to pretend like you've got some shape. Look, my pet, I'm afraid Jesus makes me charge for the charm because everything I earn as a card-reader I give to an orphanage. But if you can't, don't pay, just come pay me when everything comes to pass.

—No, I'll pay, ma'am, yoiu got everything right, you are …

She was practically drunk, she didn't know what she was thinking, it felt like someone had given her a good knock on her head with its sparse hairs, she felt as disoriented as if an unhappiness had befallen her.

Most of all she was learning for the first time what others called passion: she was passionately in love with Hans.

—And what do I do to grow more hair?—she dared to ask because she already felt completely different.

—Don't get your hopes up. But anyway: wash your hair with Aristolino soap, don't use hard yellow soap. I won't charge you for that advice.

Even that? (explosion) her heart beat, even more hair? She'd forgotten Olímpico and could only think of the foreigner: what luck to get a man with blue or green or brown or black eyes, you couldn't go wrong, the range of possibilities was vast.

—And now—said Madame Carlota—leave and go after your marvelous destiny. And even though another client is waiting I gave you extra time, my little angel, but it was worth it!

In the sudden gush (explosion) of a vivid impulse Macabéa, half ferocious, half clumsy, planted a cracking kiss on Madame Carlota's cheek. And she felt again that her life was already getting better, right then and there: because it was good to kiss. When she was little, since she didn't have anyone to kiss, she'd kissed the wall. When she caressed someone else she was caressing herself.

Madame Carlota had gotten everything right, Macabéa was stunned. Only then did she see that her life was miserable. She felt like crying when

she saw her other side, she who, as I said, had always thought she was happy.

She stumbled out of the fortune-teller's house and stopped in the alleyway darkened by the dusk—dusk which is the hour of no one. But she with dimmed eyes as if the last end of the day was stained with blood and almost black gold. So much richness of atmosphere received her and the first grimace of the night which, yes, yes, was deep and showy. Macabéa stood a little dizzy not knowing if she'd cross the street since her life had already been changed. And changed by words—we have known since Moses that the word is divine. Even for crossing the street she was already a different person. A person pregnant with the future. She felt inside her a hope more violent than any despair she had ever felt. If she was no longer herself that meant a loss that counted as a gain. Just as you can be sentenced to death, the fortune-teller had sentenced her to life. Everything suddenly was a lot and a lot and so wide that she felt like crying. But she didn't: her eyes glistened like the dying sun.

Then as she stepped off the pavement to cross the street, Destiny (explosion) whispered swift and greedy: now, quick, it's my turn!

And enormous as an ocean liner the Mercedes hit her—and at that very moment in some single corner of the world a horse as if in reply reared in a peal of neighing.

Macabéa as she fell still had time to see, before the car fled, that Madame Carlota's prophecies were already coming true, since it was a very luxurious car. Her fall was nothing, she thought, just a shove. Her head had hit the curb and she stayed there, her face gently turned toward the gutter. And from her head a thread of blood unexpectedly red and rich. What I meant was that despite everything she belonged to a stubborn race of dwarves that one day might reclaim the right to scream.

(I could still go back and rewind the last few minutes and happily start again at the point when Macabéa was standing on the sidewalk—but it doesn't depend on me to say that the blond and foreign man looked at her. Because I've already gone too far and can't turn back now. Luckily I at least didn't and won't speak of death and only of a hit-and-run.)

She lay helpless on the side of the street, perhaps taking a break from all these emotions, and saw among the stones lining the gutter the wisps of grass green as the most tender human hope. Today, she thought, today is the first day of my life: I was born.

(Truth is always an inexplicable inner contact. Truth is unrecognizable. So it doesn't exist? No, for men it doesn't exist.)

Returning to the grass. For that puny creature named Macabéa great nature showed itself only in the form of grass in the sewer—were she given the thick sea or the high peaks of mountains, her soul, even more virgin than her body, would go mad and her organism would explode, arms here, intestines there, her head rolling round and hollow at her feet—as you dismantle a wax dummy.

She suddenly paid a little attention to herself. Was what was happening a deaf earthquake? The land of Alagoas had opened in cracks. She stared, just for the sake of staring, at the grass. Grass in the great City of Rio de Janeiro. Random. Maybe Macabéa had once felt that she too was random in the unconquerable city? For her Destiny had chosen an alley in the dark and a gutter. Was she suffering? I think so. Like a hen with a half-severed neck running terrified dripping blood. Except the hen flees—as you flee pain—in panicked clucks. And Macabéa was struggling mute.

I'm going to do everything I can to keep her from dying. But what an urge to put her to sleep and to go off to bed myself.

Then it started to drizzle lightly. Olímpico was right: all she was really good for was raining. The fine threads of freezing water slowly soaked her clothes and this wasn't comfortable.

I ask: was every story ever written in the world a story of affliction?

Some people sprouted in the alleyway out of nowhere and gathered around Macabéa without doing anything just as people had always done nothing for her, except that now at least they were glancing at her, which gave her an existence.

(But who am I to rebuke the guilty? The worst part is that I have to forgive them. We must reach such a nothing that we indifferently love or don't love the criminal who kills us. But I'm not sure of myself: I have to ask, though I don't know who can answer, if I really have to love the one who slays me and ask who amongst you slays me. And my life stronger than myself, replies that it wants revenge at all costs and replies that I must struggle like someone drowning, even if I die in the end. If that's the way it is, so be it.)

Is Macabéa by any chance going to die? How should I know? And not even the people standing there knew. Though just in case a neighbor had

placed beside her body a lit candle. The luxury of the rich flame seemed to sing glory.

(I'm writing about the meager minimum adorning it with purple, jewels and splendor. Is this how you write? No, it's not by accumulation but by stripping naked. But I fear nakedness, since it is the last word.)

Meanwhile, Macabéa on the ground seemed to become more and more a Macabéa, as if reaching herself.

Is this a melodrama? What I know is that melodrama was the summit of her life, all lives are an art and hers inclined toward the great uncontrollable weeping like rain and lightning.

A thin man in a ragged jacket therefore appeared playing the fiddle on the street corner. I should explain that I saw this man once at dusk when I was a boy in Recife and the screeching and acute sound underlined with a golden line the mystery of the dark street. Beside the pitiful man was a tin can in which the coins of those who listened to him with gratitude for mourning their lives clattered dryly. Only now do I understand and only now has the secret meaning sprouted: the violin is a warning. I know that when I die I'll hear the man's violin and demand music, music, music.

Macabéa, Hail Mary, full of grace, serene promised land, land of forgiveness, the time must come, ora pro nobis, and I use myself as a form of knowledge. I know you to the bone through an incantation that comes from me to you. To scatter oneself wildly and yet behind everything pulses an inflexible geometry. Macabéa remembered the docks. The docks went to the heart of her life.

Macabéa ask for forgiveness? Because one always does. For what? Answer: that's the way it is because that's the way it is. Was that the way it always was? It always will be. And if it wasn't? But I'm telling you it is. So then.

You could tell perfectly that she was alive from the constant blinking of her big eyes, from the thin chest that was rising and falling in perhaps difficult breathing. But who can tell if she wasn't needing to die? Because there are times when a person needs a little bitty death and doesn't even know it. As for me, I substitute the act of death for a symbol of it. A symbol that can be summed up in a deep kiss but not on a rough wall but mouth-to-mouth in the agony of pleasure that is death. I, who symbolically die several times just to experience the resurrection.

I find with joy that the movie-star hour for Macabéa to die has not yet come. At least I can't guess if the blond and foreign man will come to pass for her. Pray for her and may everyone stop what they're doing to breathe life into her, since Macabéa for now is adrift in chaos like the door swinging in an infinite wind. I could wrap it up by taking the easiest route, killing the infant-girl, but I want the worst thing of all: life. So let those who read me get punched in the stomach to see if it's good. Life is a punch in the stomach.

For now Macabéa was nothing more than a vague feeling on the dirty cobble stones. I could leave her lying on the street and simply not finish the story. But no: I'll go on to where the air runs out, I'll go to where the great gale leaps away howling, I'll go to where the void begins to curve, I'll go where my breath takes me. Does my breath deliver me to God? I am so pure that I know nothing. I only know one thing: I don't need to pity God. Or do I?

She was so alive that she moved slowly and drew her body into the fetal position. Grotesque as ever. That reluctance to give in, but that longing for the great embrace. She embraced herself longing for the sweet nothing. She was cursed and didn't know it. She clung to a thread of consciousness and mentally repeated over and over: I am, I am, I am. Who she was, was what she didn't know. She'd gone to seek in the very deep and black core of her self the breath of life that God gives us.

Then—lying there—she had a moist and supreme happiness, since she had been born for the embrace of death. Death which is my favorite character in this story. Was she going to say farewell to herself? I don't think she's going to die because she wants to live so much. And there was a certain sensuality in the way she'd huddled up. Or is it because pre-death resembles intense sensual throes? Because her face looked like a grimace of desire. Things are always days before and if she doesn't die now she is like us on the day before her death, forgive me for reminding you because as for me I can't forgive my clairvoyance.

A smooth, chilling, freezing and acute taste as in making love. Could this be the grace that you call God? Yes? If she was going to die, in death she would go from virginity to womanhood. No, it wasn't death because I don't want that for the girl: just a collision that didn't even mean a disaster. Her effort to live seemed like something that, if she'd never felt it, virgin that she nevertheless intuited, because only now was she understanding that a

woman is born a woman from the very first cry. A woman's destiny is to be a woman. She had intuited the almost painful and whizzing moment of love. Yes, painful and such a difficult reflowering that she used for it her body and the other thing you call a soul and I call—what?

Then Macabéa said a phrase that none of the passersby understood. She said clearly and distinctly:

—As for the future.

Would she have longed for the future? I hear the ancient music of words and words, yes, that's it. At this very moment Macabéa feels a deep nausea in her stomach and almost vomited, she wanted to vomit something that wasn't her body, to vomit something luminous. A thousand-pointed star.

What am I seeing now and that frightens me? I see that she vomited a little blood, vast spasm, essence at last touching essence: victory!

And then—then the sudden rattling of a seagull, all at once the voracious eagle lifting to the high airs the tender lamb, the sleek cat mangling some dirty rat, life eats life.

Et tu, Brute?!

Yes, that's how I wanted to announce that—that Macabéa died. The Prince of Darkness won. Finally the coronation.

What was the truth of my Maca? As soon as you discover the truth it's already gone: the moment passed. I ask: what is? Reply: it's not.

But do not mourn the dead: they know what they are doing. I was in the land of the dead and after such black terror I resurged in pardon. I'm innocent! Don't consume me! I am not saleable! Woe to me, all lost and it's as if the great guilt was mine. May they wash my hands and feet and then—then may they daub them with oils sacred from so much perfume. Ah such will for happiness. I'm now forcing myself to laugh in a great burst. But I don't know why I'm not laughing. Death is an encounter with oneself. Lying there, she was as big as a dead horse. The best thing is still this: not to die, because dying is insufficient, it doesn't complete me, I who need so much.

Macabéa killed me.

She was finally free of herself and of us. Don't be afraid, death is an instant, it passes like that, I know because I just died with the girl. Pray forgive me this death. Because I couldn't help it, you accept anything

because you've kissed the wall. But then all of a sudden I feel my last grimace of revolt and howl: the slaughter of doves!!! Living is luxury.

Okay, it's over.

With her dead, the bells were ringing but without their bronzes giving them sound. Now I understand this story. It is the imminence in those bells that almost-almost ring.

The greatness of every one.

Silence.

If one day God comes to earth there will be great silence.

The silence is such that not even thought thinks.

Was the ending as grandiloquent as you required? Dying she became air. Energetic air? I don't know. She died in an instant. The instant is that blink of time in which the tire of the speeding car touches the ground and then touches it no longer and then touches it again. Etc., etc., etc. In the end she was no more than a music box that was slightly out of tune.

I ask you:

—What is the weight of light?

And now—now all I can do is light a cigarette and go home. My God, I just remembered that we die. But—but me too?!

Don't forget that for now it's strawberry season.

Yes.

Translator's Afterword

IN 1954, WHEN SHE WAS LIVING IN WASHINGTON AS the wife of a Brazilian diplomat, Clarice Lispector received the French translation of her first book, *Near to the Wild Heart*. This book, published in Rio de Janeiro a decade before, was the first of her works to be translated in any foreign country, and the result was calamitous.

In a series of letters that reportedly "damaged the health" of her editor, she offered valuable advice to her future translators.

"I admit, if you like, that the sentences do not reflect the usual manner of speaking, but I assure you that it is the same in Portuguese," she writes. "The punctuation I employed in the book is not accidental and does not result from an ignorance of the rules of grammar. You will agree that the elementary principles of punctuation are taught in every school. I am fully aware of the reasons that led me to choose this punctuation and insist that it be respected."

Her translators would do well to recall this point. Because no matter how odd Clarice Lispector's prose sounds in translation, it sounds just as unusual in the original.

"The foreignness of her prose is one of the most overwhelming facts of our literary history, and even of the history of our language," the poet Lêdo Ivo wrote.

The Canadian writer Claire Varin has regretted her translators' tendency to "pluck the spines from the cactus."

The tendency is understandable. It may even, to some extent, be inevitable. Clarice Lispector's weird word choices, strange syntax, and lack of interest in conventional grammar produces sentences—often fragments of sentences—that veer toward abstraction without ever quite reaching it. Her goal, mystical as well as artistic, was to rearrange conventional language to find meaning, but never to discard it completely.

Paradoxically, the better one's Portuguese, the more difficult it is to read Clarice Lispector. The foreigner with a basic knowledge of Romance grammar and vocabulary can read *The Hour of the Star* with ease. The Brazilian, however, often finds her extremely difficult. This is because her subtle rearrangements of everyday language are so surprising that they often baffle the reader, particularly the reader with little experience of her work.

When my biography of Clarice Lispector, *Why This World*, was published in Brazil, a surprising problem appeared. No fewer than five copyeditors examined the lengthy manuscript. And every one of them tried to correct Clarice's own prose.

Yet her books are not untranslatable. They are not littered with regionalisms, slang, puns, or inside jokes. Her meaning is almost always perfectly clear. The translator must therefore resist the temptation to explain or rearrange her prose, which can only flatten it and remove from it that "foreign" aura that is its hallmark, and its glory.

Here, in the last book Clarice Lispector published in her lifetime, the language she had dislocated in *Near to the Wild Heart* almost cracks. It has a kind of crepuscular beauty that, even when not entirely intelligible intellectually, creates in the reader an emotional—even tactile—sensation. In *Why This World*, I wrote that

much of Clarice Lispector's subsequent fame, her enduring popularity among abroad public, rests on this thin book, in which she managed to bring together all the strands of her writing and of her life. Explicitly Jewish and explicitly Brazilian, joining the northeast of her childhood with the Rio de Janeiro of her adulthood, "social" and abstract, tragic and comic, uniting her religious and linguistic questions with the narrative drive of her finest stories, *The Hour of the Star* is a fitting monument to its author's "unbearable genius."

It is a particular personal satisfaction to inaugurate the New Directions retranslation of Clarice Lispector with *The Hour of the Star*, the first book of hers that I read, as a college sophomore. I have since been intimate with her work for many years, but it was only during the translation of this book that I fully realized how much courage it took to write like this.

I hope that this new version, along with the work of the translators responsible for the subsequent volumes, will restore the spines to the cactus.

BENJAMIN MOSER
UTRECHT, AUGUST 2011

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